

Log Horizon, Vol. 11: Krusty, Tycoon Lord

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VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

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LOG HORIZON

■ KRUSTY, TYCOON LORD



桃花流水窅然去

Far along the flowing water that
carries the beautiful peach blossoms

別有天地非人間

It's another world that belongs
not to humans.

LOGHORIZON

Here it is: my first (and favorite) exercise-related job in ages! Finally! Not only that, but as in Volume 4, they've let me draw illustrations again. I'm honored. This time, I drew several rough sketches with different compositions, and asked my brain about them intently (which is fun, too). The Exercise is my particular favorite. The parameters were as if they'd get super-unbalanced, and they look like they'd be fun to play. If there's another opportunity, I really hope they let me draw again!

► EXORCIST (SUBSTITUTE FOR KANNAGE)

 RITE
 ELF

▼ Comment from Marlene

A run and a bearded bishop. The director's designs show a rich variety of races and ages, and it makes me happy.

▷ PALADIN (SUBSTITUTE FOR SAMURAI)

 WOLF-FANG
 HALF ALV

▼ Comment from Maire:

Knight who vanquish evil spirits. *Classics* whose balance tends to be biased have an appeal that's all their own.

▶ **TEMPLAR** (SUBSTITUTE FOR CLERIC)

SPACES  HUMAN  RITIAN

▼ Comment from Manager

It's really cool how they were heavier equipment than the knights in the director's design! Personally, I'd like to play



THE ORIGINAL
CLASS DESIGNS OF THE
OVERSEAS SERVERS

► SOUTHEAST ASIA



► PESILAT (SUBSTITUTE FOR MONK)

[RACES]



DWARF

WOLF-FANG

▼ Comment from Mamare

That low stance looks as if it would result in some unique combo punches.
Even though he's a dwarf, he's acting like a protagonist!

▶ SOUTHEAST ASIA



▶ DUKUN (SUBSTITUTE FOR KANNAGI)

[RACES]
♂ RITIAN
♀ FOXTAIL

▼ Comment from Mamare

A simultaneously shady and powerful design that seems as if it would have unique motions.



THE ORIGINAL
CLASS DESIGNS OF THE
OVERSEAS SERVERS

▶ INDIA



▶ RAJPUT (SUBSTITUTE FOR SWASHBUCKLER)

[RACES]
♂ HUMAN
♀ FELINOID

▼ Comment from Mamare

The cat-lady sure is cute. They look like they'd toy with you with tons of twin-blade strikes.

▶ INDIA



▶ TANTRIC (SUBSTITUTE FOR KANNAGI)

[RACES]



FOXTAIL



DWARF

▼ Comment from Mamare

Even though this class is a substitute for Kannagi, they use musical instruments to cast long-term buffs.



THE ORIGINAL
CLASS DESIGNS OF THE
OVERSEAS SERVERS

► MIDDLE EAST



► DERVISH (SUBSTITUTE FOR KANNAGI)

[RACES]



ELF

HALF ALV

▼ Comment from Mamare

They dance in those voluminous costumes, whirling around and around, right? I'd love to see the motions for this class.

► MIDDLE EAST



► GHAZI (SUBSTITUTE FOR SAMURAI)

[RACES]



FELINOID

ELF

▼ Comment from Mamare

So gorgeous, it makes you think they've got server-specific weapon models as well. I wish they were on the Yamato server, too.

LOG HORIZON

Adventure: you choose, weight is borne by your winged soul! The mystical world of Thailand is home to dragons and gnomes, magical forests, and dark forests. Prepare your wings and leave your life as you know it behind. You have a chance to live a new life in a new world.

■ KRUSTY, TYCOON LORD

MAMARE TOUNO

ILLUSTRATION BY KAZUHIRO HARA

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ON
NEW YORK

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Log Horizon, Volume 11
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LOG HORIZON, VOLUME 11

Krusty, Tycoon Lord

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CHARACTER INTRODUCTIONS

BESEERER



THE GUILD MASTER OF DDO, AREA'S LARGEST COMBAT GUILD. ALTHOUGH HE LOOKS CALM AND

INSOLENT: INNOCENT



SHE USED TO BE THE LEADER OF THE TEA PARTY. SHE LEFT TWO YEARS AGO, BUT SHE'S FULLY RECALCITRANT ABOUT EVERYTHING AND HER

THE GEN WITH HEROIC AMBITIONS



AN AMERICAN PLAYER BORN AND RAISED IN NEW YORK. DEEP DOWN, HE HAS ENTHUSIASTIC AMBITIONS OF HEROISM. IN KANAMI'S GROUP, WHICH HAS NO ONE TO ACT AS A BRAKE, HE COUNTS AS A SENSIBLE TYPE.

THE ANCIENT HERO



AN ANCIENT MOUNTAIN MONK WHO TRAVELS IN WHO BOASTS MATCHLESS COMBAT STRENGTH. THE CURSE OF FAIRY EYE HANDICAPS HIM SO THAT HE NEEDS AN ADVENTURER'S HELP TO DEFEAT MONSTERS.

GIRL IN MAID OUTFIT



EVER SINCE KANAMI PICKED HER UP, COPPELIA HAS ACCOMPANIED HER ON HER TRAVELS AS HER FAITHFUL SERVANT. SHE'S CONSTANTLY MODEST AND DEVOUT, BUT IN BATTLE, SHE USES SWORDS IN BOTH HANDS TO PRAGMATICALLY DISPOSE OF ENEMIES.

PLOT

THROUGH A FULL-CONTROL ENCOUNTER IN THE SHIBUYA UNDERGROUND RUINS, SHIROE DEFEATED THE GENIUS TALIKTAN, WHO HAD ATTACKED THE YAMATO SERVER.

THERE, HAVING ACQUIRED A MAGIC DEVICE THAT SEEMED CAPABLE OF SENDING A TRANSMISSION TO THE MOON, SHIROE ATTEMPTED TO MAKE CONTACT. ALTHOUGH HE'D CALLED THE MAGIC DEVICE BELIEVING HE'D FIND A HINT ABOUT A WAY TO RETURN TO EARTH, AN UNEXPECTED VOICE RESPONDED.

THE VOICE BELONGED TO KANAMI, THE LEADER OF THE TEA PARTY, WHO SAID SHE WAS ON THE ZHONGYUAN SERVER.

IN THE COURSE OF KANAMI'S CAREFREE CONVERSATION, ANOTHER SHOCKING FACT CAME TO LIGHT:

"KRUS-KRUS ALMOST DIED, BUT HE'S OVER HERE."

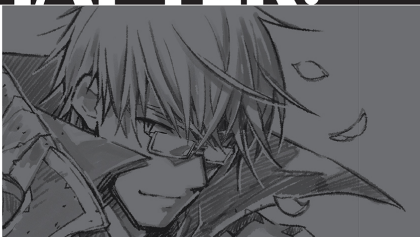
INCREDIBLY, THE MISSING KRUSTY'S WHEREABOUTS WERE REVEALED.

WHAT IS KRUSTY, WHO HAD ABRUPTLY VANISHED, DOING ON THE ZHONGYUAN SERVER?



THE TEAM THAT CONQUERED THE SHIBUYA RAID.

CHAPTER.



IMMORTAL IN ETHEREAL UTOPIA

▶ NAME: KRUSTY



▶ LEVEL 95

▶ RACE: HUMAN

▶ SUBCLASS: BERSERKER

▶ HP: 15974

▶ MP: 7987

▶ ITEM 1:

[POCKET WATCH WITH CAT MOTIF]
A ONE-OF-A-KIND ITEM MADE BY AKANEYA, WITH CATS ON ITS LID AND LONG HAND, AND A MOUSE ON ITS SHORT HAND. UNUSUALLY FOR A POCKET WATCH, IT HAS AN ALARM FUNCTION, AND IT MAKES A NOISE THAT SOUNDS LIKE A CAT MEOWING. HE LIKES IT BECAUSE IT ENDS JAMMING AND NOISE. HE'S TRAGED THE PRINCESS WITH IT BEFORE BY TELLING HER A CAT HAD COME BY TO PLAY.



▶ ITEM 2:

[WHITE MARTEN CHANGPAO]
A LONG, LOOSE ROBE WITH NOVEL EMBROIDERED AROUND THE SLEEVE CUFFS. IT WAS STORED IN THE BAI TAO SHRINE, IT WAS MADE WITH FINEST-CLASS MATERIALS, AND IS EXTREMELY COMFORTABLE. IT'S CURRENTLY FARTED, AND BECAUSE THE MARTENFOLK MENDED IT, MOST OF ITS MAGIC POWERS HAVE BEEN LOST.



▶ ITEM 3:

[RED GINSENG TEA]
A BLEND OF SEVERAL HERBAL MEDICINES AND TEA LEAVES. A VARIATION ON ORDINARY RED GINSENG TEA, A RECOVERY ITEM WITH STIMULANT AND BLOOD-BUILDING EFFECTS. IT WAS PREPARED FOR KRUSTY, WHOSE WOUND WOULD STOP BLEEDING, AND HE DRINKS IT OFTEN... BUT WHY DOES IT TASTE DIFFERENT EVERY TIME?





<Peaches of
Immortality>
Marvelous fruit eaten
by immortals. They're
often stolen by weasels
and monkeys.

Peach blossom petals fluttered in the cool air, dancing by in ones and twos.

As their backdrop, rocky peaks with sheer surfaces jutted up through the clouds. Although faint wisps of greenery clung to their summits and hollows, they gave the impression of knife blades.

It would have been safe to call the view magnificent.

Due to the distance, they didn't look large, but compared with the palace and the summerhouse where Krusty was reclining, every peak had to be several kilometers wide.

The sky was a subdued pale indigo. This fairyland protruded past the sea of clouds, but he sensed nothing as inconvenient as thin air or freezing temperatures. It was chilly, yes, but not bad enough to bother him if he wore a baggy traveling robe.

Krusty, who'd thrown himself down on a lounge chair that spilled over with cushions, gazed at the distant view from his position of decadence.

All the walls of this summerhouse had been removed; this place was above the clouds, so it never rained here. The roof, too, which was made with beautiful colored tiles, wasn't strictly necessary; the wind was never strong. It was a very quiet, tranquil place.

A peach blossom petal parted from its twig and drifted down to Krusty, bringing along its fragrance as it settled onto his sleeve. He glanced at the petal out of the corner of his eye, but left it there, not bothering to brush it away.

The big wolf dog that lay by the base of the lounge wagged her tail lazily, so Krusty stroked her fur. She was far hungrier for attention than she looked.

The wolf dog's tail happily thumped the floor.

"Master Immortal, your meal is ready."

When he glanced over, Hua Diao had just appeared. The girl, who'd stated her business without bothering with greetings, was an attendant who saw to Krusty's needs here at Bai Tao Shrine. She had adorable round ears, and she was wearing a pretty—if faded—indigo *ruqun* robe.

“Is it time for lunch already?”

“Yes, it is. Noon. The sun is shining brightly, you know.”

“Are you sure about that? The weather seems rather hazy.”

“That’s because this is an enchanted land. Even the sun shines brightly in a restrained manner. Wonderful to have such a good climate, isn’t it? All right, come to the dining room.”

“That seems like a lot of work.”

“I thought you’d say that, and so I brought it with me on a cart. I’m quite considerate, you see.”

“Is that right?” Krusty responded, sitting up.

He couldn’t say he was hungry, but he wasn’t so full that he couldn’t eat, either. It was a vast, vague sensation, but apparently, that was a basic attribute of this “fairylend.” In the two months since he’d arrived here, Krusty had grown completely used to the place.

As if she’d taken his attitude as permission, Hua Diao began briskly and efficiently setting out his meal. Although she was a bit of a busybody, she was a good, devoted servant.

The dishes on the table consisted of rice topped with sautéed vegetables and an amber-colored soup.

Hua Diao and the other heavenly martenfolk were civil servants, not cooks. Apparently, there were no Chefs in the shrine in the first place; the martenfolk had absolutely no skills in that area. Naturally, Hua Diao was no exception, and when Krusty had arrived, she’d had no cooking abilities whatsoever.

However, that wasn’t the worst of it. The tribe had been charged with the duties of *tian li*, or heavenly palace officials, and being strict about formalities, they were under the impression they had to prepare more than a dozen dishes for each meal. The result had been an array of ten or twenty failed recipes—vegetable scraps and charcoal—and it had just made him sad.

At this point, thanks to Krusty’s instruction, there had been substantial improvement. A rice bowl with sautéed vegetables was far from court cuisine, but the taste was worlds better. Most important of all, unlike charcoal, this was actually edible.

Krusty promptly set to work with his chopsticks and steadily ate his way through about half of it.

He was an elegant, alabaster-skinned young man to begin with, so no matter what he did, he looked passably well-mannered while doing it. He was also a warrior with an excellent build, so the speed with which he ate certainly wasn’t slow, but even now, due to the fact that he sat with his spine perfectly straight, he looked graceful. Being able to look like that even when you were eating a sautéed vegetable rice bowl was a plus if ever there was one.

Under the table, the wolf dog was gnawing on some unbattered deep-fried meat she'd gotten from Hua Diao. When the wolf got hungry, she went down the mountain pass and hunted likely looking monsters for her supper, so given that, she enjoyed the meals the girl gave her as if they were dessert. She certainly was a clever one.

Hua Diao bustled around serving Krusty and the enormous beast. While she couldn't cook at all, she boasted that making tea was her specialty, and she was getting said service ready at this very moment.

Apparently, martenfolk were "weasel spirits."

They were classified as demispirits, and in *Elder Tales*, they had been a race that players could talk to but couldn't select.

Swallowing a mouthful of soup, Krusty said to his servant, "This turned out well."

"Did it?! Oh, I'm glad. After all, Master Immortal, you're difficult to please."

"Am I?" he murmured, cocking his head.

Was that really the case? In the first place, he was in charge of preparing the morning and evening meals. This was because, even though they were master and servant, Krusty felt that chores should be shared.

He was the type who believed that any meal would do, provided it was nutritious and it tasted like something you could at least stand to swallow, and he'd never gotten angry about the meals Hua Diao and the others made, not even once. As you'd expect, charcoal and strange, murky broth had bigger problems than flavor, and so he'd requested improvements. But it seemed unfair to call this "being hard to please."

At any rate, Krusty had never criticized Hua Diao and the others.

That said, this was all according to Krusty's awareness. From their perspective, Hua Diao and her people probably saw something different.

Krusty saw it as a division of chores, plain and simple, but the fact that the guest they were supposed to be serving homemade dinner every night; that the dishes were beautiful, plentiful, and varied; that he provided the delicacies of a foreign country unstintingly; and that he even finished the prep work for the next day's breakfast along with the dinner preparations—it was possible that all these things put heavy pressure on Hua Diao and the other servants.

They'd gotten the wrong impression: "Master Immortal is a great gourmet, and he eats the lunches we make only reluctantly."

The source of this misunderstanding was the New Wife's Apron Krusty used, but because no one had realized that, the matter had grown more complicated.

For his part, Krusty gazed absently at the peach blossoms and said things like “I don’t really feel like having lunch,” and Hua Diao just couldn’t take it. What the remark actually meant was “It seems like a lot of trouble, so I’m going to take another nap,” but it made them break out in a cold sweat, wondering whether the fact that he was a gourmand meant he wouldn’t accept their food.

She thinks I’m hard to please.

→ That’s not true. I’m grateful that you take care of me.

→ I should tell her that.

→ Should I make something delicious for dinner?

→ That’s what I always do.

→ I should thank her.

→ She’s never accepted thanks seriously.

→ Is there any real harm in being considered “hard to please”?

→ Not particularly.

→ It may not be necessary to pay the cost of taking steps...

I suppose it isn’t anything I really need to deal with.

As he came to that conclusion, Krusty set down his chopsticks, wearing a sober expression.

At any rate, almost none of the things that happened in this world were particularly noteworthy.

On being told he was hard to please, he’d thought, *Well, that’s a problem. What should I do?* but now that he’d thought about it, it wasn’t a problem after all. If he looked like that, all it meant was that he looked like that. It was the sort of thing you’d let go with no more than an *Is that so? ...Well, I guess it is*, and being seen that way didn’t seem to have done him any damage. As far as he was concerned, it was just fine with him.

“Master Zhu Huan sent us food.”

“That was very kind of him.”

Hua Diao didn’t seem to have noticed Krusty’s brief internal self-examination. With a cheerful swirl of her skirt, she began counting on her fingers.

“Chicken, boar, deer, mountain pheasant, duck, and eel. Tofu and greens, leeks and bok choy. Rice and sugar and *ma* and *la*. There’s pure white grain and brown grain, too.”

“Is that what’s put you in such a good mood?”

“Oh, it’s nothing like that...!”

At Krusty’s question, Hua Diao gave a startled little gasp and put her hands to her cheeks. Apparently, she had been aware of it.

She’s probably just excited, huh? Krusty thought.

This enchanted land was an extraordinarily tranquil place, and they could pick the finest peaches and apricots to their hearts' content. On the other hand, there were all sorts of things they couldn't get, such as grains, marine products, and animal flesh. To make delicious, diverse meals, they needed a variety of ingredients, and these had to be sent up from the world below.

That said, this place was technically a fairyland, part of the heavenly palace, which meant that traveling down into the foothills and back was difficult in and of itself. To get there, you had to pass through Sirius Grotto, a long, monster-haunted labyrinth. It was a dangerous place for ordinary citizens.

Zhu Huan was an Adventurer, a master of martial arts, and one of the few people who could safely traverse Sirius Grotto. He was also the one who'd shown Krusty to this place.

He was a good fellow, quite pleasant, a commoners' champion who ran a large guild known as the Lelang Wolf Cavalry.

"I would have at least said hello to him."

"He had companions with him. They said they were going to capture Dire Wolves today."

"Is that right?" Krusty responded. Zhu Huan was the leader of a group, and he was probably busy. Hua Diao's head seemed to be entirely filled with thoughts of the food they'd brought; she was fidgeting restlessly.

"Did they bring honey and eggs?"

When she heard Krusty's question, she couldn't control herself any longer, and her tail stuck straight out. Its tip started tracing figure eights in the air, over and over.

The martenfolk loved sweets, and their traditional meals incorporated lots of fruit. Rich baked goods made with sugar and eggs seemed to have given them a kind of culture shock. After he'd served some to them once, they'd latched on to them with abnormal intensity. She was probably dying to know whether he was going to make them a dessert this time, too.

She's expecting baked goods from me.

→ I'm neither a confectioner nor a chef.

→ If she's all right with something simple, though, I could make that.

→ Potential candidates for simple baked goods:

- Madeleines
- Muffins
- Cookies (already made once)
- Tarte Tatin

- ↑ I believe I could make these, if I followed a recipe.
- They may be easy, but do I have a reason to make them?
 - No.
- Do I want to eat them?
 - I have no particular fondness for sweets.
- Do I have any reason not to make them?
 - No.
 - Consider the cost of the wasted time and trouble.
 - In fairyland, these can be ignored.

“Sure. I’ll serve a dessert with dinner,” Krusty answered.

Hua Diao bounded in mute delight, breaking into a big grin. It was terribly mercenary of her.

Only Hua Diao and a few other members appeared before Krusty using the magic that gave them human shapes. However, the work those few did kept the Bai Tao Shrine up and running, so making them treats once in a while wasn’t a task onerous enough to refuse.

Either way, time passed too slowly in this enchanted land.

He had plenty to think about, but this place was far too dull. Sneaking out on moonlit nights to cut down Oni and playing at being a cook were about the only ways he had to kill time.

Hua Diao, who had watched Krusty put down his chopsticks, began to thank him, her ears twitching. Her people were conscientious.

However, just as she was about to say what were probably words of gratitude, she turned back, clearly tense, and began to sniff the air vigorously. The wind had grown stronger at some point, and it was shaking the treetops.

The air had begun to grow humid.

As if the sea of clouds had gradually risen, a sudden, fierce gust of damp wind announced the arrival of something abnormal.

Hua Diao’s eyes flicked right and left, quickly; she looked a little frightened. Krusty threw her a rope: “Thank you for the meal. Could you change my sheets?”

Gratefully, Hua Diao responded with a “Yes, sir,” and ran off toward the shrine.

On the lounge in the summerhouse, Krusty tidied himself up a bit.

Compared with Akiba, fairyland certainly was dull. However, every single guest it received was eccentric. Remembering interesting people and people who hadn’t been at all entertaining, Krusty smiled thinly, bracing himself for the visitor.

Before five minutes had passed, a beautiful young woman appeared.

She wore a dark veil that obscured her features, but she had black, lustrous hair and red lips, and the soft curves of her body were sheathed in a vivid jade traveling robe. The woman had perfumed her clothes by burning an incense that had a vaguely sweet, old-fashioned scent, and she was in the summerhouse before he was aware of her presence.

“How do you fare, Master Krusty?”

“Fine, thanks. You look well, Enchantress Youren.”

“I’ve asked you to just call me Youren, you know.”

Although Krusty had thanked her for asking about his health, he didn’t feel any particular obligation to the woman, but he kept that to himself and treated her deferentially, with the utmost courtesy. He’d learned that most humans were satisfied if you treated them with respect.

In the first place, being polite was a way of confirming whether you and the other party were the same sort of person.

For example, if you passed a ferocious beast on the road, it might suddenly latch on to your head with its jaws. That was a scary thought. Of course, since you’d be able to tell it was a ferocious beast just by looking at it, all you had to do was run away. However, if the other party was a barbarian, since they were human, it would be hard to identify them as such on sight. Since their common sense was different from yours, though, they might suddenly strike you with a blood-stained two-handed ax. If you’d assumed they were just like you and the attack took you by surprise, you’d die.

That said, it was very difficult and time-consuming to be on your guard against every person you passed on the road.

Politeness was a way to save yourself this trouble.

I’m one of your kind, and I speak your language.

I won’t suddenly display an interest in the taste of your flesh.

It was a ritual to confirm these things.

Humans tended not to take an interest in strangers’ inner selves. Since that was so, as long as they had that minimal guarantee—in other words, that they wouldn’t abruptly suffer harm—they were generous about everything else.

Of course, it was a fact that, when it came right down to it, manners weren’t something you could count on. Sudden disasters, sudden changes, sudden lunatics: Krusty knew that true human nature actually lay on that side of things. Fundamentally, this world was a circus of unfair chaos, a place where anything could happen.

In that respect, the woman in front of him was rather

uninteresting. She was an ordinary person who plotted mundane affairs in the regular way.

He couldn't trust her, but he didn't actively dislike her, either. She wouldn't abruptly attack him with bloodshot eyes; she wasn't unpredictable enough for that. In a way, you could say she was a disappointment.

She was the sort of person you could find anywhere, so he wasn't very concerned with her. Those were his unvarnished thoughts.

If possible, he'd have preferred that she leave him alone, but unfortunately, this self-styled Enchantress was the type who didn't listen. That was a common characteristic in women who were otherworldly attractive.

"How do you feel, physically? What about your memories?"

"There aren't any major problems." He shrugged.

His physical condition had neither improved nor worsened since he'd regained consciousness after having been flung to the Zhongyuan server. The level-150 bad status known as Soul Darkening Curse hadn't changed, either.

NATURAL HP RECOVERY IS SUSPENDED.

HP MAY NOT BE RECOVERED THROUGH RECOVERY SPELLS, OR THROUGH FACILITIES OR ITEMS.

THE TELECHAT FUNCTION IS SUSPENDED.

MOVEMENT ACROSS SERVER BOUNDARIES BECOMES IMPOSSIBLE.

MEMORIES ARE LOST.

The effects of the bad status were wide-ranging and serious. When he checked it against his memories, even though they were patchy, he could tell that the curse's content wouldn't have been possible in the days of the game.

Krusty had been carried to this fairyland on the back of the enormous wolf dog Gumon, but both Zhu Huan—who'd saved him—and Hua Diao had blanched at his status.

They'd told him it was a terrible, unprecedented curse. Since the HP he lost when wounded didn't return, that was probably accurate.

He currently had about 5300 HP. That was roughly half his maximum.

The display looked like a warning, and it was an ominous red. Krusty wasn't particularly disturbed or concerned, though.

This was because, while his HP was down by half, it didn't seem as if it was worth making a big fuss over. HP was a resource in combat, and when you were up against a strong opponent, it indicated how durable you were. In other words, it was a tool for fighting enemies.

If he actually got into a fight against an enemy and didn't have enough HP, he would probably think about it. However, under those

circumstances, the issues that would come up were “How do I increase my HP?” and “How do I break through this situation with five thousand HP?” and if he accepted that for what it was, it was nothing to agonize over.

Was it inconvenient? Well, maybe. He thought it might be, at least.

However, if asked whether it was a problem, he would have said, *Not particularly.*

On Earth, it was likely he would have been half paralyzed or in a coma, which would definitely have been inconvenient, but in Theldesia, it didn't even hurt. It was part of the reason he ended up taking things easy.

“No problems’... How courageous you act. It’s heartbreaking.”

If anything, what struck him as dismal was the woman in front of him.

Her eyes were still hidden by her thin silk veil, but her posture as she spoke to Krusty made her seem to be looking up at him. The conversation was probably her way of showing her worry. Even Krusty understood she was hoping for some sort of reaction from him.

→ Why is she worried about me?

→ Good intentions.

→ That seems rather implausible...

→ Even if her intentions are good, they’re self-centered.

→ As part of a negotiation.

→ She wants a definite statement that I’m in dire distress.

→ I’m not in dire distress.

→ Though in general terms, I might be, actually.

→ She’s going to try to force assistance on me.

→ Working from our last conversation, that’s very likely.

→ Information gathering.

→ Is she checking to see how bad my memory loss is?

→ Does she know me well enough to be capable of checking on that?

→ I’m not even sure I remember whether we’re acquainted or not.

→ Am I interested enough to guess at her motives?

→ As motives, are they enough to interest me?

→ Circular argument.



And so Krusty played along with her, letting his shoulders slump.

He wasn't actually discouraged or anything like it. It was a technique for getting along in life: He was matching her mood. He knew from experience that, in most situations, it was safe to respond this way.

He thought scratching Gumon behind the ears would be a more positive and constructive thing to do, but apparently, doing it in the middle of a conversation was considered rude. It made Hua Diao become obviously cross.

"It really doesn't seem inconvenient to me. This place is peaceful, and anyway, I spend all day watching the peach blossoms."

"—Doesn't it frighten you not to have memories?"

At the Enchantress's words, Krusty broke off and considered.

Was it frightening enough to mention?

If you lost your memories, you simultaneously lost your motive for getting them back, and he didn't seem to feel any real need to do so. He thought he was probably the sort of person the world referred to as "cold-hearted."

Krusty gave a little smile. "That doesn't seem to be the case."

"What about this amuses you?"

This time, apparently, he really had discouraged the Enchantress.

Inwardly, he thought it was funny.

"Master Krusty."

The Enchantress tried to take his hand, and he evaded her slim white fingers.

"That curse is unknown, and there is no one who can cure it. If left alone, there's no knowing what calamity it may invite."

As Krusty gazed at her, smiling, the woman repeated a treatment suggestion she'd made several times before.

"I may not look it, but I preside over the mystic art of healing. The art was granted to me by the Queen Mother of the West, who lives on the moon. If you'll only give me permission, Master Krusty, I would like to brew an elixir of life for you."

"I'm not good with bitter things, you see."

Still smiling, Krusty declined the offer.

Was the Enchantress saying medicine she brewed could cure this, even though it was "an unknown curse no one could cure"?

Didn't that mean it wasn't exactly incurable?

In any case, immortal wizards and mystic arts struck him as fishy.

Well, even Krusty wasn't flatly denying the woman's words. That sort of paranormal skill probably did exist. This was a secluded region where mysterious peach trees bore fruit all year round, so something on that level could exist. Since he'd passed level 90, Krusty himself

was something like a low-ranking immortal wizard, and that was fine.

However, he didn't like the way Enchantress Youren had confirmed his weakness, then proceeded to force her good intentions onto him. He didn't care enough to angrily criticize her for it, but he also didn't want to get actively involved with her.

The theatrical atmosphere that hung around the woman was boring as well. Was there anything in the depths of that aura? Probably not. It was likely this affected air and way of thinking were the woman herself. In other words, the Enchantress thought her good will—although he didn't know whether it was actual good will or merely for her own benefit—would get through. She thought that other people would acknowledge it. That her way of doing things would get the job done.

She thought Krusty would agree.

In his hole-ridden memories, many women were like that, so he didn't intend to single out the Enchantress for criticism, but this was dull. If her goal was to get consent, she could just have been aboveboard about it and handed him a consent form or a contract. Assuming the conditions were appropriate, the matter would move forward easily.

A negotiation over promises in search of profit, before advancing to the stage of consent: That was how society worked, and it was probably necessary, but there was a definite smell of corruption about it.

What should he call it, a sense of not being connected to anything?

Even if Krusty fostered this relationship, it was likely he wouldn't gain any new knowledge. He had a hunch he wouldn't even manage to lose anything by it, let alone profit.

She wasn't fun to tease, either, the way [REDACTED] or [REDACTED] had been.

Krusty shrugged, letting his eyes go to the distant, drifting peach blossoms.

He'd been told that attempting to descend the mountain would be suicidal, so he hadn't tried it yet, but if things were like this, there was no telling how true that was. Now that his wounds had largely healed and he'd learned all there was to know about the surrounding situation, this fairyland was much too boring.

Unless something happened soon, he'd end up spending his time doing nothing but stifling yawns. That said, it wasn't as if he had any leads to follow even if he did descend to the world below.

So, maybe not having memories actually was inconvenient. But after thinking just a little, he knew there was no way he'd have had acquaintances on the Zhongyuan server to begin with, so the presence

or lack of memories wouldn't be an issue toward finding them down there.

So no, it really wasn't an inconvenience.

The Enchantress was speaking to him in tones that sounded sincere, but in the spare moments between his responses, he was scratching the soft fur behind Gumon's ears.

He felt sure that, even if he didn't get impatient, an uproar would break out sooner or later.

The stirring in his chest was alerting him to the approach of that disturbance. To Krusty, it was a far more familiar friend than the suspicious woman in front of him.

► 3

Meanwhile, in another spot in the expanse of Theldesia, another party was preparing to take a brief rest. The time difference was a mere five minutes or so, and with one of Earth's airplanes, the distance would have been no more than a short hop. However, the denizens of this world could only advance over the ground like ants, and to them, the national border was far, far away. Even so, in a corner of what was definitely the same highlands of Eured, several other protagonists were continuing their journey.

"Carnivore style!"

Kanami twirled around, holding drumsticks in both hands as if preparing to strike with them.

"Don't play with your food," Leonardo replied.

The sky in this country was vast.

It was so wide it could hold blue sky, a sunset, and purple twilight at the same time.

This beautiful gradation appeared practically every day, but the colors were never truly the same. Below it, once again, Kanami's party was camping under an extremely cold sky.

They'd met up with the merchant Ju Ha, then parted ways, one group heading north and the other south. All sorts of stuff had happened on this trip, Leonardo thought.

Though—no, it wasn't okay to let his guard down; the trip was still in progress.

"Things are cheerful during every evening meal, aren't they?"

Chun Lu, her face serious, was sitting on a rug she'd spread over the desiccated ground. As she spoke, she sipped soup out of a bowl. She was an Adventurer, a guard who belonged to the Lelang Wolf Cavalry. The seasons had changed, and she was currently wrapped in

a fluffy fur.

“It simply means that telling Kanami to settle down is useless.”

The Ancient hero Elias Hackblade had polished a piece of fruit on his sleeve and was nibbling on it with white teeth. The girl in the maid outfit who was briskly serving him soup was the Cleric Coppélia.

Including Leonardo, who was stuffing his face with some rather flat bread, they were currently traveling as a band of five.

“I did think you were restless, but who’d have thought it was this bad...?”

“If there’s a voice crying for help in the north, I go there and punch out the villains. If I hear there’s a poor village in the south, I head over there and kick their bad harvest.”

What’s the point of kicking a bad harvest? That’s just dumb.

Leonardo pinned Kanami with a dubious look.

Her actual words had gone off the rails and showed no sign of coming back, but what she’d said was true, in a bad way. After their adventure in Aorsoi in central Eurasia, you’d have thought the party would have made straight for Yamato in the Far East, but instead they’d strayed dramatically.

The incident at Ruined Colonnade Tonnesgrave had happened in September, which meant that, at this point, they’d spent three months wandering around the wasteland.

Granted, it apparently hadn’t been strange for a journey along the Silk Road to take six months or a year, so in that sense, they couldn’t declare that their pace was slow.

Rather than keep traveling, it wasn’t at all unusual for them to spend three days or a week at the villages they visited, resting up. If there was a caravan going their way, it was common sense to adjust their time by ten days or so in order to travel with them.

Actions like these were wisdom from the People of the Earth, used as a defense against the natural dangers of the wilderness and monsters, but even Adventurers like Leonardo and the others couldn’t afford to take those lightly.

Leonardo’s group did have several dozen times the combat power of People of the Earth, but there had been that incident in the Tekeli Ruins. Not knowing about the wasteland and the surrounding topography could have fatal consequences. Even if it didn’t endanger their lives, if they got lost in a winding ravine, they could easily end up wasting several weeks. They really did need information from the People of the Earth, who were well versed in local roads and traffic. Apparently, that was what journeys on this continent were like.

Of course, while these ordinary circumstances were prolonging their trip, it was also true they were being delayed by Kanami’s habit of saving people, or her ability for detecting trouble.

At Turkul, they'd defeated a Sand Turtle that had dominated a great river and was rampaging, and at a nameless, impoverished village, Coppélia had blessed watermelon seeds and planted a field.

At Mount Hei Feng, they'd been dragged into a terrible mess when the Kuromami Tribe, a band of malicious tanuki spirits, had stolen Kanami's hot pants. (They were apparently thought to hold mystical power.) They'd ended up gathering seven ingredients to make a miraculous medicine for the leader, Great King Kuromami, to turn the fur on his belly white... Or rather, Leonardo had.

Ugh, god.

Just remembering it made his head hurt.

Kanami had charged, Coppélia had followed impassively, Elias had raced to the scene in a panic, and Leonardo had cleaned up the aftermath in a glum daze. What was he anyway, the project manager for a raging dumpster fire? Even on the Avenue, he'd never heard of anything like this.

As long as he was with Kanami, it didn't seem like they'd run out of fuses for trouble. This evening, though, it looked as if they'd run clean out of difficulties, and they were finally camping peacefully... Although even that was more than noisy enough.

"Do you think we're getting pretty close to Shimanaikui?"

"Yes."

Chun Lu nodded, licking some fat off her fingers.

"If we keep traveling along this mountain range, we'll arrive in less than a week."

This was why they were traveling with this female Adventurer, who was a member of the Lelang Wolf Cavalry. Shimanaikui marked the end of central Eured; from the perspective of what would be China on Earth, it was the town where the Silk Road began in earnest. In other words, in terms of Earth, it would be somewhere around Mongolia.

Kanami's party (which included Leonardo, although he wished it didn't) was bound for Yamato. To them, Shimanaikui was a milestone on their journey east, while to Chun Lu, it was the headquarters of the guild she was returning to.

Kanami's group had wanted a guide, Chun Lu had wanted combat power for the way home, and thus their goals had meshed.

That said, conditions in this land seemed to be growing more and more chaotic, and Leonardo thought the Lelang Wolf Cavalry might have taken an interest in them, since they were outsiders who weren't affiliated with a major guild... Frankly, he suspected they were keeping an eye on them.

Naturally, even if they were under observation, that in itself

wasn't enough to make them feel alienated. In the situation they found themselves in, if there was an uncertain element, anyone would try to investigate it. Even if they didn't know whether the code had a bug in it or not, engineers' instincts told them, *Somehow, it feels like the processing is gonna stall somewhere*. At the very least, they'd set a breakpoint beforehand. Since they were harboring a landmine like Kanami, he also thought it was only natural that others would be wary of them.

Besides, if Leonardo's group got pulled into some sort of trouble near here, they intended to use the Lelang Wolf Cavalry. Since they were planning to use them, it probably wasn't fair to object when the other party did the same thing.

"Shimanaikui, hmm? If we're going there, I'd like a horse."

"You want a horse?"

"Uh-huh, uh-huh!"

Kanami nodded vigorously.

"You can ride horseback? So I guess you're upper-crust, then, huh?" Leonardo muttered, but apparently, Elias had taught her.

She might have developed a taste for it during the business with KR. Riding a friend around seemed like a nasty thing to do, but KR had looked like he was egging her on, so Leonardo kept quiet about it.

"A horse, hmm?"

Chun Lu looked pensive. "Is there some sort of problem?" Elias asked.

She denied this briefly, then began to speak. "It's possible to buy both horses and Horse Summoning Whistles. However, this land is teeming with monsters. Wolves might be a better bet."

"Wolves?"

"Yes. In Eured, they're common mount items. The popular edition is the Wolf Mount Summoning Whistle, I think. They allow you to summon and ride huge wolves. The Lelang Wolf Cavalry is famous for them."

Kanami's eyes sparkled. "Huge wolves!" she shouted.

Leonardo and the others had seen the gray-furred wolf she'd summoned several times over the course of their journey. The group was traveling without mounts, and to match their walking pace, she didn't normally summon it. However, they'd seen it in action multiple times, whenever danger fell upon them.

True, that summoning technique might be ideal for a journey across a wasteland. If all you were thinking about was transportation, you'd probably choose a horse, but if they were attacked by a carnivorous monster while on horseback, their ability to defend themselves and adapt to their environment was bound to prove

problematic.

“Uh. Chun Lu? Do they sell those wolf whistle items?”

“Yes, they’re for sale. The guild has artisans who can make them as well. Only...”

“Only?”

“Even if you lump them all together as wolf summoning whistles, there are quite a few different ranks and types.”

Leonardo nodded understandingly.

It was only to be expected. *Elder Tales* held a wide range of mount-summoning items. With the exception of ultra-high-class items that had flight capabilities, nearly all of them could be acquired by ordinary users. However, for the most part, even these had level-based usage restrictions. Level-20 items for level-20 Adventurers. Level-50 items for level-50 Adventurers. The size, sturdiness, and color of the horses they summoned were different, too. Naturally, capabilities such as speed and the amount of time they could be used for varied as well.

“Since you are all high-end players with levels in the nineties, commercial whistles probably won’t be enough. In that case, you will need to complete a quest.”

That also sounded reasonable.

Summoning items were sometimes obtained as the result of a quest, but it was also just as likely to acquire core materials for the creation of said high-level items through those quests.

“There is a dungeon near here known as Sirius Grotto. It’s intended for high-level parties, and quite a lot of different wolf-type monsters appear there. Core materials can be obtained from several species. If your subclass is Tamer, you can tame the monster and receive a summoning item directly, but...”

“Hey, people. What’s your subclass? Mine’s Delivery Person.”

“Me, me, over here! I’m a Chef!”

“Coppélia is a War Priest.”

“I can use nothing but fairy techniques.”

“Okay, so the quick way’s out, then,” Leonardo summed up.

Still, maybe it really was the correct choice to head down into that Sirius Grotto dungeon and hunt monsters for a while...

But before he could think any further on the matter, Kanami had plunged into fully motivated mode and started muttering: “Hmmm. Wolves, huh? I’ll have to come up with a name! Wolfie...Mr. Wolf...?”

Once she was like this, resistance was futile.

His traveling companions each had abilities he could count on, but he knew that adorable Coppélia was no use whatsoever at restraining Kanami, and that the handsome blond fellow—who had put a hand to his chin and was saying “Not fairy horses, hmm...?”—was a lot more busted than he looked.

Obtaining wolf mounts seemed to be their predetermined route.

That said, even if it was, there were very few problems with it. Shutting themselves in a dungeon would be a lot easier on their nerves than wandering north and south through the wasteland without a plan. Even in terms of time, Leonardo thought, it would probably take a day at the longest.

If that was all they had to do to secure transportation, it was practically the definition of being lucky.

Leonardo had realized, vaguely, that this decision would trigger their second adventure in central Eured.

However, everybody has the right to at least try to comfort themselves. Especially when it lay in the as-yet-unseen future, they were free to fantasize that “this time, it looks like we’ll make safe, peaceful, trouble-free progress.”

Leonardo, a programmer from the Big Apple, had put this into practice on all sorts of projects.

Naturally, it had failed every time.

However, he still hadn’t learned his lesson, and he tried to stay optimistic this time as well.

After all, adventuring New Yorkers couldn’t survive without being tough.

► 4

The city headquarters was an old-fashioned single-story house on a large lot.

When Zhu Huan, guild master of the Lelang Wolf Cavalry, passed through the gate, he smacked his companion, a Wise Wolf, lightly. His intelligent partner wagged its tail once, then went home to its wolf kennel.

Wolf mounts were practically the Lelang Wolf Cavalry’s trademark. They were large wolves that were summoned with whistles, and there were several different kinds. Creatures were summoned and put to work, so according to this world’s logic, once the summoning period was over, they went off somewhere. However, with high-level summoning whistles, the summoning period was longer than twenty-four hours, which made it possible to keep them active indefinitely.

Of course, if an Adventurer sent them away when they weren’t being ridden, then there was no need to worry about feeding or grooming them. However, because some members of the Lelang Wolf

Cavalry wanted to live with their wolves in the guild house instead of sending them away, the guild kept a headquarters with multiple lodges and kennels on a large plot of land.

Unusually for central Eured, the mansion also had a hedge.

There were fig and apricot trees in the garden behind that hedge, but at this time of year, the scenery was rather forlorn. Of course, everything was dry in the center of the continent. Even the rocks had the moisture leached out of them, and exposed as it was to drastic temperature fluctuations, the land seemed somehow brittle. Compared with those grassy plains and wastelands, the city that was their home was quite fortunate.

“Hey, it’s the captain.” “It’s the captain!”

Two small figures came charging at Zhu Huan, brandishing tree branches; they ran into him, then rolled on the ground like puppies. It looked like something out of a manga, but Zhu Huan and both members of the pair were level-90 Adventurers. They had the leisure to horse around like this.

“Yion, Aruen, what are you doing? Are you stupid?”

“I’d rather you didn’t call us stupid.”

“Well, stupid’s what you are.”

“Shhh. You know that’s a secret.”

“It might have gotten out already.”

“Hey, Captain, has it gotten out?”

“I know, you idiots,” Zhu Huan told them, wearing a sullen, thoroughly disgusted expression.

The pair, who wore fluffy furs, squealed over that comment for a few moments, but then they abruptly looked awkward and made a report.

“A long-face is here.”

“Somebody snooty is here.”

They were troubled, but at the same time, they seemed vaguely out of sorts. Their expressions tipped him off, and Zhu Huan asked his aide Ma Bao—who’d appeared from the depths of the building just as soon as he’d walked through the door—for the particulars.

“It’s exactly what you think. It seems as though they might be forcing things.”

“They’re insisting we sign on as their minions?”

“If you don’t join the Blue King faction, you’ll regret it. The White King or Red King would massacre you, plus all the People of the Earth in this city. Hurry up and become our vassals while we’re still discussing it peacefully,” they said.

“Vassals, huh? Are their heads full of *The Records of the Three Kingdoms*? What era are they from anyway? Lousy country bumpkins.”

Thoroughly fed up, Zhu Huan threw his pack aside roughly, then went through the dirt-floored room and out into the courtyard.

Winters in this area were extremely harsh. The landscape turned white and gray, then stayed that way for several months.

In the courtyard, there was an oven made of grimy-looking bricks, with a cranky Salamander lying lazily inside it. Around the oven, guild members were boiling water and roasting meat, trying to get their chores out of the way while there was daylight left.

It was cold, but not freezing. The scene was filled with lively energy.

The visitors to the guild house had been messengers from the Singing Sword Company.

They'd stopped by frequently over the past two months, demanding that they form an alliance or become their subordinates. It had been happening a lot lately; they might have finally gotten serious.

Why were they making these proposals? It had to do with one of the quirks of the Zhongyuan server, the vast region that stretched across Eured from its center to the east, the land that was the equivalent of China.

Elder Tales was an MMORPG that had been developed by the American Atharva Company, and its game world, Theldesia, was enormous. While its size had been cut in half through the Half-Gaia Project, it held a nearly exact replica of Earth's topography.

This immense in-game world had been recreated through 3-D modeling. You were free to go anywhere, and there were almost no game-type partitions. It was what was referred to as an "open world."

The attractions of this sort of game were the sense of liberation and freedom, and the fact that it stirred up a spirit of adventure. However, on the other hand, it was extraordinarily hard to provide content for all that space. For example, if you created a village, then set up an attack event there, the number of players who'd manage to stumble onto that village by accident was far too small. Since the world was so large, if you created events at random, they'd end up as events no one could find.

The orthodox solution was to prepare a prodigious number of events, then design things so that, no matter what location you chose in this wide world, you'd find intriguing challenges. However, to do that, you needed a massive, truly astronomical number of events.

In Theldesia, the area of Zhongyuan was approximately 2.5 million square kilometers. In order to have one event for every 5 square kilometers—the area a party of six Adventurers could explore in a day—you'd need one million events. When you considered that

several designers, 3-D modelers, and programmers had to work for about a week to create a single event, the required budget would far surpass the scale of the game.

Having anticipated this, Atharva had outsourced each area to operating companies in countries all over Earth, but the company that had been assigned the Zhongyuan server, the Kanan Internet Corporation, hadn't had astronomical development funds, either. As *Elder Tales* had grown popular, profits had gone up, and so they'd hired brilliant designers and programmers, but it really hadn't been possible to fill the vast Chinese server with captivating adventures.

As a result, Kanan Internet had come up with two big policies.

One was to set up a priority ranking for content preparation. They had begun preparing content for Theldesia starting with the coastal areas, in what would have been Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Beijing on Earth. More players logged in from these areas, and so they were already equipped with player towns. It made sense to increase the number of dungeons, folklore, stories, events, and quests starting within their vicinities. All regional operating companies had done it like that. It was just like the way content preparation in Japan, on the Yamato server, had begun in Akiba and its surroundings.

The other distinguishing feature of the Zhongyuan server was the guild wars.

On this server, fighting between guilds was commended.

Of course, it wasn't a system of unrestricted warfare, but even so, it was true that large-scale player-versus-player combat had been encouraged. When guilds fought in the battle zones that had been set up all over the place, the winner would receive guild points corresponding to the results. With enough points, the victor could become the ruler of the city located near the battlefield. This was true even for player towns like Yandu and Dadu.

In this system where players fought each other, there was no "Content cleared" end point. Even if a guild won and became the ruler of the nearby territory and cities, that guild would be challenged by another one. In other words, it was necessary to defend. Struggles between guilds were essentially limitless events, intended to accelerate their military expansion and their accumulation of items.

As a result, compared with the trouble of creating events, the operating company had believed it would become extremely long-lasting, perennially interesting content. By and large, it had succeeded.

Naturally, that system was from the days of the game: Kanan Internet had felt that creating a vast amount of content would be difficult, and it had hit upon the idea of having the players pick up some of the burden, and the result had been the guild wars. However,

Theldesia was now reality, while that system remained in effect.

The result was that there were still Adventurer players on the Zhongyuan server who went along with that system... An overwhelming majority, in fact.

True, if you accumulated enough guild points, you won sovereignty over a city. Once you controlled a city, you could make the surrounding People of the Earth obey you as well, without exception, which meant it was possible to live like ancient royalty.

In the players' defense, in the interests of fairness, they did none of this out of cruelty or acquisitiveness. They acted to defend the places they called home, out of fear and suspicion of each other, and to secure their own safety.

As game content, the guild wars hadn't been a bad thing. In the days of *Elder Tales*, even Zhu Huan had raced across battlefields on wolfback.

However, in Theldesia as it was now, he thought they were the root cause of chaos. Immediately after that transference incident, Zhu Huan and the other Lelang Wolf Cavalry members had seen this coming, and they'd left the player town of Dadu and run here, to Shimanaikui.

But apparently, they hadn't managed to get away entirely.

"The Blue King is that one, right? The sort of bovine-looking one."

"I am unable to answer questions regarding whether he eats grass."

"He seems like an omnivorous ox."

"Yes, that's the one. Even though that Singing Sword Company guild has a stylish name."

"Mr. Blue King makes himself out to be the civilian-rule type, you see," Ma Bao responded, offering him some warm-looking socks.

"Well, it's late in the game, but I expect he caught on."

"Caught on to what?"

"To the fact that if they wage unending war, the People of the Earth will suffer for it. Even if they acquire a territory to rule, if the People of the Earth flee on them, both the fields and commerce will stop dead. As a matter of fact, quite a lot of them have fled over here."

"Ah. Is that what it's about? Yeah, you're right; they are running here."

Not just People of the Earth, but Adventurers as well.

The twins who'd been all over him a short while ago hadn't been members of the Lelang Wolf Cavalry to begin with, either. They'd picked them up on the way over. He thought they were still around ten years old.

In Zhongyuan, the People of the Earth seemed to live together in

clans. Relatives by blood and marriage lived in groups, and if people shared their last name, even if they lived far away, they'd help them for that reason alone.

Since that was the case, if they were fleeing the area where they lived, the entire clan would work together to do it. They might even run as a group of several hundred people. Shimanaikui was on the outskirts of Zhongyuan. To be accurate, the city lay on the border between verdant Zhongyuan and the wilderness of Aorsoi. Due to the peculiarities of its location, it was no wonder that many People of the Earth who weren't fond of the turbulence in Zhongyuan came here.

Lately, in addition to merchants with a sharp eye for opportunity, even wealthy farmers who should have been tilling the fields often arrived as entire clans.

"I wonder if something's up."

"Do you suppose it's the Ritual of Coronation?"

"You think that's connected to this?"

"I couldn't say."

Still, Zhu Huan thought, this was a nuisance. The major guilds were too greedy. If they were lucky, just maybe, they might strike it rich: That was all they thought about. Small and midsized guilds like his own tended to wing it, living from hand to mouth, but that was enough. When men of small caliber were idle, they did mischief.

"It would be nice if those great heavenly immortals would do just a little more work."

"Please don't say inauspicious things. The situation is already out of control; if the Ancients forced their way in, it would be nothing but trouble."

"You think so?"

Zhu Huan tilted his head to one side, considering it.

The man he'd delivered to the Bai Tao Shrine a little while ago had seemed pretty skilled. He was a full-fledged general. Zhu Huan thought someone like that would bring some good combat power to the table, but either way, ever since that transference incident, fairyland had fallen silent. As a smaller guild, they had no intention of stirring up trouble. It would be fun if a hero like that led the armies of the outlying regions and dominated Zhongyuan, but he couldn't get engrossed in that sort of pipe dream.

After all, his daily duties were important.

For that reason, Zhu Huan loudly issued orders to his subordinates, then had the materials for the week's contract work brought to him. Personal preferences aside, as guild master, he couldn't exclusively work outdoors. The wasteland winter was deepening, but that didn't mean an end to monster attacks and trouble.

► 5

They'd said they'd arrive in less than a week, but that didn't mean that week would end without any trouble.

Kanami, who'd wrapped a mantle around herself (although her midriff was still exposed), took the way that was a magnet for all sorts of headaches.

If Leonardo and the others had been able to use a map app to get a bird's-eye view of the area they were walking through, it would have shown them the northern foothills of the vast mountain range known as Tian Mai. In Earth terms, they were the Tian Shan Mountains, the backbone of Eurasia.

Since they had seen these same mountains to the north while they were in Aorsoi and were now seeing them to the south, they must have cut across them at some point, but Leonardo didn't remember doing it.

To be accurate, they'd spent over half a month prowling around the sort of mountainous region where dragon-type monsters appeared every two hours, so it wasn't clear exactly when they'd crossed over to the north.

Hanging around central Eurasia—and the Tian Shan Mountains at that—from autumn to early winter was practically signing up to commit suicide, but Adventurer physical capabilities made that sort of recklessness possible, as did the sloppiness of the world of Theldesia.

Since they'd parted with the merchant Yagudo, their party now consisted of five Adventurers. Because there were no People of the Earth with them, they didn't really understand what "normal" was. Even if they dug through the snow to make a spot to camp and spent the night there, they could get by with a simple *Whoa, that was cold; my snot's gonna freeze*, and so there was no way for them to pick up common sense.

That said, here in the Tian Mai Mountains, they'd reached a People of the Earth Wolf-Fang hamlet and a Mountain Hare village, so he suspected that this whole world might be pretty good at the "survival" game.

Of course, it was also possible the real Tian Shan Mountains were a peaceful place that was bursting with life as well and that, as a New Yorker, he just didn't know about it.

The world opened up with undulating mounds and troughs.

For a hilly area, the visibility was unbelievably good. Leonardo had lived in the canyons between buildings, and as far as he was concerned, it was terribly unsettling. A single hill-like rise went on for what was probably several kilometers, and others like it spread all through the plains at the foot of a seven-thousand-kilometer-class mountain range.

The scale was too big, and it made him feel as if his senses were going haywire. It seemed more like he'd shrunk than as if he was in an enormous mountain range. Wavy ground, like a messy picture drawn by a child—but it was impossibly gigantic. The land was preposterous.

According to Chun Lu, in summer, this area was absolutely beautiful. Radiant green sprang up all over the black earth and the rocks, and the wasteland became a grassy plain. The bushes that were here and there produced berries, and the thin trees grew thick foliage.

At the moment, it was a monochrome landscape: a wilderness of black dirt and gray rock with dead grass clinging to it, and the occasional white drift of residual snow. However, Leonardo thought, it was a place he'd like to visit during the summer.

And then Coppélia might start feeling romantic... Or maybe not...

Still, reality was heartless, and the party kept trudging across wide-open plateau country coated with lingering snow. There were about ten hours of daylight, and they spent nearly all of it traveling. Then, about every two hours, a dragon or wyvern or roc or flying spirit came along, and they fought it. *Even Dorothy never went through trouble like this*, Leonardo thought, as if grumbling to himself. Although the Oz he knew was the version in the musical.

In this region, there were no boulders taller than they were, no large thickets, no stands of trees—nothing they could use for cover.

The rolling wasteland went on for as far as they could see.

In a place like that, they couldn't escape from flying monsters, so there was no way to avoid combat.

In the mythologies of all ages and places, dragons were depicted as powerful mystical beasts, and the world of Theldesia was no exception. Even within their various level demographics, dragons were monsters who were stronger than the rest, and that was true here in Tian Mai as well. They were Party-rank monsters with levels ranging from 86 to 90. If Leonardo and the others put their strength together, they weren't unbeatable enemies, but they also weren't opponents they could afford to get careless with. On the contrary, the way they attacked individually, one at a time, made them extraordinarily convenient training partners. However, it didn't always go so well...

“You’re too far out, Elias.”

“This is nothing!”

Elias charged, slashing with his fairy longsword, Crystal Stream. The fierce torrent canceled out the Dragon Breath, but Elias himself had taken significant damage.

“Whoa, support Eli-Eli!”

“Yes, Master. Reactive Heal, Sacred Wall.”

Coppélia, who was in her work clothes—her steel maid outfit—swung her enormous traveler’s trunk around, casting a recovery spell. A chartreuse light and a pale-pink barrier blocked the flames, simultaneously healing Elias’s wounds.

“And-a-boooooom!”

Kanami, who’d issued the order, jumped straight up, slamming a vertical kick into the lower jaw of the dragon, who was above her head. A flame-like effect that was unique to the warrior classes shone, fanning aggro.

However, this sequence of events really had been Elias’s blunder.

The key to combat lay in the division of labor. Elias was an Ancient with a level of 100, but by nature, he was an attacker and buffer. He wasn’t a tank, built to gather monster aggro and concentrate attacks on himself. Maybe it was all right for him to be on the front line, but he wasn’t supposed to take damage head-on.

This was less because there was a risk to his life than because the monster’s aim would lose its focus, disturbing their teamwork.

Is Elias losing his cool? Leonardo thought.

Nobody could have said Leonardo was especially good at getting along with people, so he couldn’t declare it with any confidence, but Elias had been strange lately. Particularly in combat, he seemed to put himself too far out. In the first place, although he was a swordsman, his water attacks were midrange and meant for suppression. Even considered in combination with powerful support abilities, he was a midfield mobile fighter; there was no need for him to be on the front line, and actually, having him there increased the risk for the whole party.

Of course Elias had a variety of attack methods, some of them single, short-range attacks, so he wasn’t saying he shouldn’t run up to the front line, period. However, even so, it seemed to Leonardo that they were lacking their former balance.

“Rrraaaaaaagh! Fairy Sword: Ice Burial Array!”

With a roar that seemed fit to burst his throat, countless ice stakes rose from Elias’s great sword, then flew at the fiery dragon. Kanami’s attack had thrown the dragon completely off-balance.

That one attack tipped the situation. Or, rather, it would have

been a finishing blow...if Elias hadn't been the one to strike it.

Leonardo charged in, hugging the ground, then slashed upward from that unnatural position with his blade.

Deadly Dance: He'd polished this technique so much that it formed the core of his battles, and it had evolved even further over the course of their journey. He'd ingrained the technique's elaborate structure into himself through repetitive practice, and he'd used it to bury Rasfia, the Genius of Necromancy, but that had been the beginning, not the end. On the contrary, at that stage, Deadly Dance had been a hand-to-hand technique loaded with restrictions, one that required him to perform set motions in a set order.

If he had even a slight handicap—for instance, if he couldn't move his leg, or one arm was paralyzed—he couldn't chain Deadly Dance together, because he had to strike the proper form. At the time, his technique for activating it back-to-back had been very rough. It was a technique he could only pull off against an opponent who was standing still on flat ground; he'd managed to end a fight with it back then because both he and his enemy had been in freefall at the time, and there hadn't been any way to escape.

However, things were different now. Leonardo had sorted predetermined motions into several dozen categories, put them together, and, designing the way they'd circulate with Open Loop Circulation, made Deadly Dance a more sophisticated technique.

It was an idea he'd had ever since the days when *Elder Tales* had been a game.

Why had it been an idea, instead of a technique? Because there were high hurdles to making it practical. Explained simply, Open Loop Circulation meant fitting the recast times of multiple special skills together to create one constant attack.

Take Venom Strike, for example. It was an Assassin special skill that inflicted extra damage due to Poison, and its recast-time timer had about twenty-four seconds on it. If you used it once, you had to wait twenty-four seconds before you used it again.

Venom Strike was a core attack for Assassins, and naturally, they had to wait twenty-four seconds after attacking. However, just waiting wouldn't increase the total amount of damage. If they could use some other special skill during those twenty-four seconds, they'd be able to boost the overall damage.

In that case, specifically what sort of special skill should they choose?

Even if they sandwiched in another special skill—Quick Assault, say—Quick Assault had its own unique cast and recast times. The time it took for two Venom Strikes might be enough for three, or possibly

five, Quick Assaults; the division almost never came out neatly.

On top of that, recast time fluctuated based on various conditions. Most high-level equipment had special effects that shortened recast time. It was one thing if they shortened it overall, but more of them shortened the recast times of specific special skills. For Leonardo, the recast time for Venom Strike wasn't its original 24 seconds; it was a finicky time, 22.15 seconds.

In other words, if a player wanted to master Open Loop Circulation, they had to research and practice these varied, unique combinations and structures, and they needed to factor in their equipment as well.

In addition, even if they learned it, a patch or switching equipment could easily send all that training back to square one. That was why, even among die-hard game junkies, only a handful of players even tried to acquire the technique. Naturally, Leonardo hadn't mastered it, either. Compared with the amount of work you had to sink into it, its performance was just too bad.

That was what he'd thought back when this was a game.

"Ghkguuuuh!!"

As Leonardo's Ninja Twin Flames split its scales, the dragon gave a wet scream that seemed to have gone wrong somewhere.

In this world, things were different.

On this adventure, which was now reality, combat abilities were exceedingly important. Whether they were defending themselves or accomplishing an objective, the core of Adventurer abilities was unmistakably combat.

The long time he'd spent traveling had managed to turn a New York programmer into a pretty competent warrior.

"Not yet!"

Elias launched a follow-up attack, bracing his great sword on his shoulder, but the dragon's HP bar was draining before his very eyes, approaching zero. Kanami's multilayered attacks and Leonardo's lethal serial attacks had turned the dragon's life into rainbows. The falling meter did nothing more than confirm this after the fact.

He must have noticed that. Looking embarrassed, yet still breathing hard, Elias sheathed his weapon.

"Elias—!"

Leonardo was about to call to him, to tell him he'd gone too far ahead, but he hesitated.

It would have been easy to just yell at him, but even if he could imagine what it was that Elias was feeling anxious about or holding in, he didn't know the truth of it. Leonardo wasn't a counselor. In Theldesia, where he couldn't introduce him to a company doctor,

there was no guarantee he could give him any useful advice.

To begin with, Elias was an Ancient.

At this late date, he had no intention of being picky about whether somebody was an NPC or a bot, but even so, Leonardo had been made on Earth, and the circumstances of their birth had been different. Even with his project teammate from El Salvador, things had gotten prickly every time they ate lunch (all the nutjob ate was cabbage), so he had absolutely no idea what to talk about with a companion who'd been raised by fairies.

So, how's the weather over there? We haven't seen anything but clouds and fine snow for two weeks over here. Oh, I guess it'd be the same for you, huh...?

Leonardo sighed heavily over his own fantasy.

He was tired, too. He would have liked to go talk to a counselor himself.

The more he thought about it, the more that seemed like the right idea. His project team (in other words, this party) needed a counselor who could keep an eye on their mental health. They had a colleague who was from aristocratic stock, a thoughtlessly optimistic, sales-type leader who'd take on any job, and the group's one bright spot of femininity (Kanami didn't count), who Leonardo secretly fancied, considered herself an AI.

No wonder Leonardo's stomach hurt.

"What's wrong, Leonardo?"

"Nah... It's nothing. Elias, do you go to a doctor?"

"My fairy blood keeps me from getting ill. Are you feeling unwell?"

"I think I'm going nuts."

When Elias had asked him a question, he'd tried asking one of his own instead, but as he'd figured, he hadn't gotten a meaningful answer. There were no corporate benefit service programs in this savage wasteland.

Elias was his teammate. Still, that didn't mean he and Leonardo had any shared past. After all, he was an Ancient, not somebody from Earth. Leonardo's expression twisted; he felt rather pathetic. He couldn't find anything good to say, and that brought on a pang of loneliness.

I wish I could help him out a little more.

Leonardo's shoulders slumped, and he sighed.

Thinking that, in the end, it seemed as though he ended up worrying about the same things no matter what world he was in, he thought, *Oh, I see. I guess this world really is real*, and he felt weirdly convinced.

Elias might not eat tortilla-esque things or salt-and-vinegar

pickled cabbage, but he was still a foreigner in Leonardo's workplace.

Leonardo, who hadn't ever been able to remember where El Salvador was, couldn't even figure out whether it or Theldesia was farther away.

► 6

A night in the wilderness, harsh but clear.

Getting up, Elias slipped out of the tent, which had been woven from the wool of Long-Haired Goats.

At night, temperatures were far below freezing. It got so cold that the moisture that had gotten into fissures in the rocks froze, expanded, and broke the rocks down. That was why there weren't many big boulders in this wasteland.

Elias's party had pitched their tent in a basin that would have been just big enough to slide two carts into. As a result, the tent wouldn't blow away, but once he crawled out of the depression, which came up to his chest, the night wind buffeted him.

The thin, shredded clouds drifted away, and the moon illuminated his surroundings.

It was a desolate sight.

As an Ancient, Elias was a warrior with a sturdy body, and his equipment was also pretty tough against cold air, so it only felt like a cool breeze to him. However, the effective temperature might be close to twenty below.

Behind him, the tent swayed wildly. It wasn't because trouble had broken out; Kanami had probably gotten rough. Both her noisiness and the way she tossed and turned in her sleep were familiar to him by now, and Elias smiled a little.

Ever since she'd rescued him at Ulster, far in the west, Elias had accompanied her on her journey.

At present, an unprecedented peril was attacking Theldesia. The Catastrophe had destroyed all the rules. At this point, it was probably safe to say that the Thirteen Global Chivalric Orders had been wiped out.

It had been a secret operation of vital importance.

Ultimate destruction was bearing down on the world of Theldesia. Having gained insight into the situation from a Darshana—a "memory of the future," related to them by the prophet Sumiltimahra—the Thirteen Global Chivalric Orders had stealthily concentrated their forces.

The past century and several decades of history had been all for the sake of this operation.

The Geniuses, demons who wielded grotesque powers, and an army of several tens of thousands of their kin had been sealed in the Great Stronghold of the End, but the time when that seal would be lifted was drawing near.

Elias and the rest of the Knights of the Red Branch had been in a magic circle on the outskirts of Londinium, waiting impatiently for the Great Stronghold of the End to open, so that they could go to war.

The Great Stronghold of the End was an enormous magical device meant to seal the Geniuses, but at the same time, it was also the demons' base, the Cradle. To obliterate them or seal them again, the Knights had to teleport to the Great Stronghold of the End, but for that to happen, the seal had to be open.

The instant the seal on the Geniuses was released, the Thirteen Global Chivalric Orders would use the Spatial Teleportation Devices they'd built in each location and storm the Great Stronghold of the End. The Geniuses—only just awakened, unable to grasp the situation or work as a team—would be vanquished. That was the outline of the decisive battle to protect the world, which had been promoted in secret, unbeknownst to the world itself.

The Knights of the Red Branch, who were led by Elias, would serve as the vanguard in this top-secret operation, and they gave their undivided attention to their final inspection of their equipment and the spells that imbued them. Everyone was convinced that the maneuver would succeed. After all, the Thirteen Global Chivalric Orders easily had more than five times the combat power the great attack strategy they'd been given by the prophet Sumiltimahra had called for.

The Wen Keepers.

The Obsidian Swordsmen.

The Knights of Izumo.

The Knights of Habaek.

The Fei Cui Knights.

The Winged Dragon Magic Brigade.

The Knights of Shinha.

The Knights of the Sacred Cow.

The Knights of the Seven Seas.

The Knights of the Red Branch.

The Zilant Knights.

The Blood-Sand Knights.

The Shapeless Knights.

Their forces had gathered and had even included the Shapeless Knights, who hardly ever showed themselves. Elias could state

categorically that it had been the greatest number of soldiers the Ancients could muster. Military power like that could easily have ruled the world.

However, out of the blue, tragedy had struck. Just as the countdown to the maneuver had reached eight hours, Elias and the others were hit with a surprise attack.

Geniuses, the grotesque monsters from the prophecy.

These monsters, which should still have been sealed, assailed the Knights of the Red Branch. They were shaped like humans, like fish, like birds, like dice, or like shining mist, and their incoherent yet fearsome army showered Elias's allies with bladelike tentacles, electrical attacks, and acidic gas.

The fight hadn't been all that one-sided. Even though it had been a surprise attack, the Knights of the Red Branch had held up well. They'd even re-formed their battle lines. They probably wouldn't have been able to escape defeat, but they should have been able to let the weaker rear-support personnel get away and vow to rise again.

However, the grotesques had a trump card.

The Words of Death.

The companions who heard that curse fell, one after another. Their expressions were frozen in terror, twisted as if they'd peered into bottomless darkness and touched lunacy they hadn't even wanted to see. They were definitely alive, but they weren't breathing; their hearts and lungs had stopped functioning.

Unable to stand the sight of the collapsing front line, Elias had dashed out of the main formation. He'd screamed the order to activate the Spatial Teleportation Device.

But there hadn't been enough energy. If things went on like this, the unlimited magical energy they'd drawn up from the land's mana would probably do serious damage to the Transport Gate. However, this wasn't the time to worry about that.

If the surprise attack destroyed the Spatial Teleportation Device, they'd be left unable to capture the Great Stronghold of the End. Even before that, the military power of this base would probably be wiped out.

Elias had screamed:

I'll hold them here. Knights from the main formation, use the Spatial Teleportation Device and commence the attack on the Great Stronghold of the End!

That the Geniuses had come here meant that, for some reason, the seal had been released. Since that was the case, teleportation should have been possible, and as a matter of fact, while it had been unstable, the Spatial Teleportation Device had started up.

Elias swung his great sword recklessly, slicing into the throng of demons. At this point, he wasn't thinking of defeating them.

He had to stall them for a minute longer, or even a second, to save his retreating companions.

Gradually, little by little, in the midst of time that had grown viscous enough to set his stomach burning, the retreat was progressing. In reality, it might not have taken ten minutes, but roughly half of his companions had been absorbed into the radiance of the teleportation device. The only ones who remained were Elias and a small suicide unit.

Stop.

Freeze, tremble, congeal.

An end...

...for the puppets.

Offer up the Empathiom that protects you.

Stop.

Stop this fabricated history.

These fabricated memories.

These fabricated feelings.

The timelines of this character software.

He listened to the curse, which reverberated like a funeral bell. He hoped it would be meaningless static.

However, his wish was in vain, and as it seeped into him, Elias realized, vaguely, what it meant: *He mustn't think about it. The moment he understood it, he'd lose everything.* Even though he knew this, he couldn't stop. As if a world-engulfing nothingness had pulled in the ground under his feet, in a single moment, he'd lost all sense of time, of up and down.

Oh, I see...

That is how it was, isn't it?

Strangely, the darkness that had fallen was filled with a sense of understanding and acceptance.

In the midst of this resigned stasis, which was abysmally foolish yet unapproachable, where even despair was ridiculous, Elias cut himself off. Or, no, in this darkness, orders and voluntary action were equal. Cutting off and throwing away were the same thing, stopping and withdrawing from the world were the same thing, and sleep and death were the same thing as well.

Back then, Elias had met his end.

Glaring into the darkness, buffeted by the cold wind, Elias gritted his teeth.

He wished that the flames of his rage would scorch him.

He didn't want to believe that that cold resignation had belonged

to him. The life Kanami had breathed into him had become fire and was racing through his veins. That fire was what had awakened him from his dreamless sleep.

I want to be strong.

Elias's fairy blood had given him fighting skills and a curse. Fairy Arts, a system of sword techniques unparalleled in history, and Fairy Eye, an ability that saw through malice, had both come from the fairies. However, at the same time, he'd been inflicted with a fairy curse that rendered him unable to finish off enemies.

Elias knew that all of these things were worthless.

He understood that *they weren't actually real*.

However, if he admitted that the past was counterfeit, he would probably be ushered into that dreamless sleep once again. More than that, it was likely that an Elias who'd denied the fairies wouldn't be able to be himself anymore. The fairy curse bound him, and it seemed to protect him as well.

Why am I...?

He gazed at his clenched fist, but there was no answer there.

Elias was weak.

He had ultimate power, and yet, his fighting abilities were sealed by an unfair curse. So that he wouldn't obstruct the Adventurers' activity— No; that wasn't it. This seal was a curse from his fairy blood, so that he wouldn't steal the Adventurers' prey—

Once again, the Words of Death were beginning to rage inside him.

Despair and jealousy ran wild, like a black ocean, and Elias gripped his chest tightly. This icy pain wasn't the sort of thing he could shut out by raising his anti-cold attribute defenses.

He knew that, vaguely, but he couldn't afford to admit it, and because he couldn't admit it, he couldn't escape the curse. That was the sort of snare he'd fallen into.

As he gazed at his feet, Elias noticed a shadow.

When he lifted his eyes...

When had she appeared? A graceful woman was watching him, idly.

The wind died, and thin lavender silk drifted lightly in the nighttime chill. Her eyes were hidden behind a veil, but it was clear she was looking at him.

"Did you need something, miss?"

Elias had asked his question on reflex. The woman—Enchantress Youren—spent a little while searching for words, then spoke in a voice that sounded deeply troubled.

"From what I have seen, I gather that you are a highly renowned traveling practitioner of the martial arts. My name is Youren. I live in

an enchanted cavern nearby, and while a humble one, I am an Immortal.”

“An Immortal... Then—!”

Elias had raised his voice slightly, and the lady nodded.

“While my skills are far inferior, I, too, am an Ancient... May I assume that you are Lord Elias Hackblade?”

“Indeed I am. I am Elias Hackblade, a Blademancer affiliated with the Knights of the Red Branch, one of the thirteen swords.”

Under the pallid moonlight, the pair gazed at each other.

The word *Ancient* was no more than shorthand. While it appeared to be the term for a race, in reality, it was neither a tribe nor a clan. Ancients were a type of Person of the Earth, and it meant only that they were strong—no more, no less. At the very least, that was how Elias thought of it. It was probably similar to the word *superhuman*.

Most of the Ancients belonged to the Thirteen Global Chivalric Orders, but that was due to Elias and the others’ hard work, and not all of them did. The term was a general one for People of the Earth who had power, and so, although there weren’t many of them, evil Ancients and Ancients who’d turned their backs on the world did exist.

Since it was a general term, there were many other names for them as well.

Here on the Zhongyuan server, the people called “Immortals” were Ancients. The men were known as “Immortals” while the women were “Enchantresses.” Other names for Ancients on the Zhongyuan server included “Recluses,” “Perfected Ones,” “Immortal Wizards,” and “Holy Mothers.”

Ling Tianfeng, called the White Wing Princess—a Zhongyuan Ancient who was as renowned as Elias—was the leading noble Immortal of the Fei Cui Knights, and she was also an Enchantress.

When he’d awakened from the deep sleep into which the Geniuses had plunged him, he’d tried to contact the chivalric orders, but there had been absolutely no response from any of them, in any country. Now, finally, Elias had managed to connect with another Ancient.

“I have a request to make of you, Lord Elias.”

Speaking in a voice that seemed choked with tears, Enchantress Youren threw herself at Elias’s feet, prostrating herself.

“Our Zhongyuan, with its shining history, has been visited by an unparalleled crisis as well. Fairylands everywhere have fallen or been abandoned... The Bai Tao Shrine is one such place. It is twenty *ri* to the southeast of here, two or three days’ journey. It has come under the control of a ferocious magus, and the people of the nearby villages and towns spend their days in fear of his violence. The frail heavenly

officials live in terror, counting their remaining days on their fingers.”

“A magus—”

Could it be a Genius? Elias imagined the sort of violence incarnate that would make this beautiful Enchantress abandon herself to grief.

“I do feel that it is a shameless request, but, Lord Elias, Hero of the West, I beseech you. Please vanquish the magus.”

As if pushed into action, Elias helped Enchantress Youren up.

She was suffering. She wanted to save her companions but lacked the power to do so... Just like Elias.

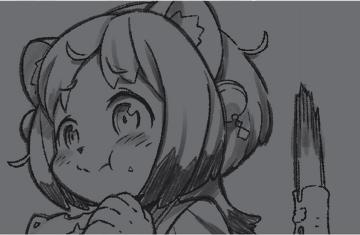
Just like that, Elias’s anguish over wanting to save his comrades but lacking the strength to do so led him to a new quest.

2



CLAYMORE AND BARDICHE

CLAYMORE AND BARDICHE



▶ NAME: HUA DIAO

▶ LEVEL 9

▶ RACE: MARTENFOLK

PERSON OF THE YEAR

► SUBCLASS: POISON TESTER

▶ HP: 535

▶ MP 468

▶ ITEM 1

[ENCHANTED FLOWER ORNAMENT]
A TAIL ORNAMENT PASSED DOWN AMONG
MARTENFOLK WOMEN, MADE WITH FLOWERS
FROM FAIRYLAND. FEW MEMBERS OF THE
MARTENFOLK HAVE LEARNED THE SPELL THAT
LETS THEM APPEAR HUMAN. THE MAJORITY
ARE SHAPED LIKE WEASELS, AND
SO THESE ORNAMENTS ARE
MORE COMMON THAN HAIR
ORNAMENTS. THE FRAGRANCE
OF THE FLOWERS OF EACH
SEASON SOOTHES THE HEART.



▶ ITEM 2

[INDIGO-DYED RUQUEN ROBE]
CLOTHES ISSUED TO THE
GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS
OF FAIRYLAND. THESE SPECIAL
MAGIC-CLASS ITEMS ARE
BOTH ELEGANT AND
PRACTICAL, AND EQUIPPING
THEM GRANTS CIVIL SERVANTS
A BONUS; HOWEVER, THE
MARTENFOLK AREN'T GOOD
AT PAPERWORK OR
REFORMING CALCULATIONS



▶ ITEM 3

[WISTERIA CANE CREEL]
A CREEL THAT'S WOVEN CAREFULLY FROM THE VINES OF THE WISTERIA THAT GROWS WILD IN FAIRYLAND. SO THAT EVEN WEASELS CAN CARRY THEM ON THEIR BACKS, THEY'RE FITTED WITH SHOULDER STRAPS. TECHNICALLY, THEY'RE MEANT FOR CARRYING THE FISH ONE CATCHES, BUT WHEN BELLIES ARE FULL, THEY'RE HABITUALLY USED AS PILLOWS FOR AFTERNOON NAPS.





<KNAPSACK>

A BAG WORN ON THE BACK
AND USED TO CARRY TOOLS
AND BOUNTY. HAS THE
ADVANTAGE OF LEAVING
YOUR HANDS FREE.

Determined to defeat the magus, Elias was glaring up at the mountain peak from the foothills, but up on that peak, in fairyland, time was flowing slowly.

Krusty stuck his hand, which was encased in a cotton-padded mitt, into a brick oven. The iron sheet was a thick one, forty-five centimeters square, and holding it in one hand would have resulted in disaster back on Earth. But in Theldesia, weight like this was nothing. He easily drew it out.

A shallow pot sat on top of the iron sheet.

The kitchen at Bai Tao Shrine was spacious, about the size of a large convenience store. It was fitted out with a full range of cooking implements, but compared with Earth, there wasn't much of a variety. Even so, in terms of copper and iron pots alone, there were at least fifty shapes and sizes, both shallow and deep.

The object Krusty had taken out of the oven was one of these: a bright, lustrous copper pot. That said, at the moment, it was serving as a dessert mold rather than a pot.

All that was visible from the top was a golden-brown crust. It had been made by adding cold water to a mixture of wheat flour and some sort of butter. The key had probably been to fold it over and over while keeping it cold so that it formed multiple layers. Underneath it lay caramelized stewed fruit, sweetened with sugar.

In other words, it was a childish trick of a dessert: He'd boiled and sweetened peaches and loquats, covered them with a piecrust, put them in the oven, and baked them for a while.

Krusty had no culinary talent, but he could at least cook.

This was because it was work.

Recipes were manuals, and manuals were written so that, as long as they did things in the proper order, even people with no talent could get results. Since cooking was work, the bottom line was that, provided they had a recipe, anyone could do it. It was simple logic.

Because "talent" spoke louder on Theldesia than on Earth, the mere act of cooking required things like a Chef subclass or items such as a New Wife's Apron. In a world like that, there wasn't much value

in manuals. This was only natural: Even if things were advertised as “possible for people with no talent,” without a subclass (aka “talent”), you couldn’t even attempt them.

In this world, where you could see whether actions were possible or impossible from the get-go, getting somewhere by learning techniques wasn’t an option. Like most people, he’d lost interest in everything outside his field of expertise. And because of that, from what Krusty’s investigations had shown him, technical books were almost nonexistent in Theldesia.

As such, an Adventurer from Earth could startle people by doing something as simple as making dessert.

Technically, he should have let it cool for a while in the refrigerator, but that struck him as a nuisance, so he inverted the pot onto a Cold Air Platter. When he did so, the piecrust that had been on the top ended up on the bottom. Freed from its pot mold, the dessert now looked like a cake topped with stewed fruit.

Krusty thought for a moment, then arranged fresh peach slices and peach blossoms on the plates. His dish looked drab by itself, so he’d have to make do with decorating it a little. He’d really rather have served it with vanilla ice cream, but there wasn’t any here at the moment, and making it would be time-consuming.

In terms of common knowledge on Earth, by the time peaches were ripe, it wasn’t possible to get peach blossoms, but this was an enchanted land of peaches, and both flowers and fruit were abundantly available all year round.

“Does Master Immortal seem to be in a good mood?”

“I can’t tell.”

“Dunno.”

“Does it look as if he’ll give us sweets?”

“Dunno.”

“...I bet he’s thinnking of something spiiiteful.”

The martenfolk were whispering. Most of their shapes were vague and blurred, like steam, so he couldn’t really see them.

They called themselves heavenly officials, which apparently meant they were spirits of some sort. Yet, even when they turned solid, they were merely otters with fine pelts, and so Hua Diao, who could take a clear human shape, was an elite.

After giving it a little thought, Krusty moved the platter to the table.

Turning his back so that the plate was hidden from the steady gazes that peeked in at it from the door, he clattered away with a spoon and fork for a bit. Then, at just the right moment, he stuck the

whole thing—platter and all—into his magic bag, then exposed the now-empty table to his audience.

Inarticulate shrieks rang out.

“The dessert is gone!”

“He ate it!”

“It got eaten!”

“The plate, too?!”

“Well, he is Master Immortal, after all.”

“Whyyy? Whyyy?”

The fact that the sweets they’d thought they’d be getting had vanished must have given them a shock; he heard heartrending cries. Shadows whose physical shapes were as nebulous as smoke hemmed and hawed at the base of the doorway.

They’re far too easy to read.

→ Is it because they’re animal spirits?

→ They say they’re heavenly officials.

→ This is another world, after all.

→ That means it’s careless to decide they’re simple just because they’re animals.

→ Some humans are this simple.

Ex 1) Like Koen.

Ex 2) And Isaac.

← In other words, deciding it’s because they’re animal spirits is unreasonable.

→ It’s possible they just happen to be incredibly hungry right now.

← Negative: They’re always like this.

→ Cinchy. (Slang.)

→ Couldn’t I rephrase that as “charming”?

→ I’d prefer something that was more gratifying to pick on.

→ Does this mean I want them to tough it out just a little longer?

↑ That hobby is questionable.

→ Objects of amusement need to be durable.

→ Boredom is poison.

At any rate, it was a dessert he’d baked for them, so tossing it into his bag and leaving it there would cause problems for him as well. He’d teased them on reflex, and he certainly hadn’t meant it seriously.

“It’s all right; it’s here.”

Krusty turned around, producing the platter.

They responded with delighted gasps. “Bring saucers and gather in the dining room,” he instructed.

At Krusty's suggestion, the invisible shadows ran off at full speed. The only one to stay behind was Hua Diao, a slight young girl who was only about a meter tall.

He carried the platter to the dining room and was carving the fruit pie with the help of an apologetic-looking Hua Diao when, out of nowhere, translucent, hazy shapes formed a line, holding plates. He began transferring small slices onto the plates, but Hua Diao volunteered to take over partway through, so he let her and sat down in a plain chair.

Tweet, tweet, tweet, tweet, tweet.

He heard the quiet, staccato call of a songbird.

Golden light slanted in through the round window with its wooden cross-shaped frame, illuminating Krusty's calm, pale profile.

In this fairyland of everlasting spring, even a corner of the kitchen seemed like a paradise where sweet fragrances hung in the air. It was a serene time, as peaceful as an afternoon nap.

The martenfolk spirits were rather noisy, and as a result, as Krusty poured tea, he looked a little morose. He didn't want to admit it, but he was practically Snow White, doing the seven dwarves' chores for them. [REDACTED] would definitely laugh at him: *You're just like a preschool teacher, aren't you?*

Apparently, there really are holes in my memories.

→ Should I do something about it?

→ According to general common sense, forgetting memories is a routine occurrence.

↑ Although, personally, I don't have much experience with it...

→ Forgetting is a novel experience.

→ Would it be better if I took a good vacation and relaxed?

→ I'm enjoying one already.

→ Is it inconvenient in any way? (Utilitarian decision.)

→ Not at present.

→ Wouldn't that depend on the reason?

→ Said reason is currently unclear.

→ Isn't the bad status the reason?

→ That merely cycles to the fact that the cause of the bad status is unclear.

↑ Take the necessity of looking for the reason under consideration.

"It looks as though I really will have to go down to the human settlements."

"Hweh?"

Hua Diao made a funny noise; she was gazing at Krusty as if startled. From the tea-colored syrup around her inverted triangle of a mouth, she'd apparently helped herself to the dessert after she'd finished serving the others.

"Is something the matter?"

"Master Immortal. It isn't possible to descend Mount Lang Jun. There are various routes through Sirius Grotto, but rank and the number of people are limited. In Adventurer terms, a party of between four and six people may pass through, so long as their levels are between eighty and ninety. I am told that there are other routes up from the foothills, but from the peak, the only choice is to go through the longest cavern."

Well, well.

Krusty gave the content a cursory examination.

He had some idea of what Hua Diao was talking about. Unbeknownst to them, he had gone down into Sirius Grotto and had seen that the path ended at an enormous bronze door. That door must be one that screened based on levels; the zone beyond it was probably a level-restricted dungeon area. While there were comparatively few in Yamato, it was a characteristic that appeared in raid zones and instance dungeons.

It was likely that "Sirius Grotto" was an aggregate of multiple dungeons with the same name. Most of the interior details would be the same, and monsters that differed by level demographic were probably stationed inside. Designing a dungeon that only a small percentage of users could enjoy would be a waste of development resources. On that thought, they'd created zones like this one, which could serve multiple levels.

He understood the design concept, but as far as Krusty was concerned, it was inconvenient, too.

"I see. In that case, there's no going down the mountain, is there?"

"No. But you are an immortal mountain wizard, Master Immortal, so I expect that won't be a problem for you."

"It won't?"

"After all, immortal mountain wizards become what they are by climbing mountains, don't they? Since it's you, Master Immortal, I think you'll be fine staying at Bai Tao Shrine... And besides, um, this is delicious."

She'd flushed red when she murmured that last bit, but that aside, she'd said something pretty unreasonable. If he attempted to supplement it, would it be something like *Immortal mountain wizards become immortal by climbing mountains, so because you are a mountain wizard, it's okay for you to live on the mountain?*

Apparently, some of the settings on the Zhongyuan server had

been influenced by Taoist myths. In that case, the idea that an immortal was someone who lived on a mountain was something he could agree with. He seemed to recall a scene in *The Investiture of the Gods* where being ordered to descend the mountain had nuances of being excommunicated. In that case, he could understand the sentiment that he should stay on the mountain.

...Except for the basic fact that he wasn't an immortal mountain wizard.

In the first place, it was likely that Krusty had been mistaken for an Immortal—probably an Ancient—because his status display was abnormal. Hua Diao and the others probably hadn't picked up on it, but it was another effect of the level-150 bad status they'd named the Soul Darkening Curse. Even in the chaotic, post-Catastrophe world, level 150 was outrageously powerful. The maximum level that Adventurers could do anything about was 90—or, in Yamato, 100.

On top of that, there were no Adventurers over level 90 on the Zhongyuan server. It was no wonder that, at level 94, Krusty seemed to be one of the Ancients, a special NPC.

He didn't have the slightest intention of blaming them for that error, but explaining and clearing up the misunderstanding seemed like too much trouble.

In the process of explaining the situation, he'd probably be on the receiving end of a lot of questions, and there were quite a few of them that even he wouldn't be able to answer. Besides, it didn't feel as though clearing up the mistake would result in a situation that was much different from what it was now.

In the clear sunlight, Krusty gazed at Hua Diao, who was absorbed in plying her wooden spoon, and thought for just a little while.

"You know, that tart is really supposed to be served with vanilla ice cream."

"Va...nilla?"

"It's a cold, sweet, creamy, frozen dessert. You aren't familiar with it?"

"No, I'm not."

The young girl shook her head, and Krusty nodded sagely. "If I go down to the human settlements, I may be able to find the ingredients for it."

"Understood, sir! As a heavenly official, I will help you descend Mount Lang Jun."

Determined, Hua Diao nodded several times, and mildly appalled, Krusty thought:

→ Too easy.

They'd been told that the mountain's name was Mount Lang Jun, "Wolf Lord Mountain."

I see, Leonardo thought, but it wasn't as if he had any particular knowledge about it. He only "saw," and that was all.

However, the same was probably true for Kanami and Coppélia. After all, the land around here was too dry and desolate. All they'd seen in the past hour were cracked rocks and cliffs and the bean-sized shadow of a bird, flying at an astonishing height.

When he heard they were headed for this Mount Lang Jun, he'd thought, *I see*, but he had no idea whether this was it or not, or where the mountain was, or whether they'd already been on it for ages.

For quite a while now, they'd been walking over steep, high-altitude terrain, and in the space of an hour, they'd encountered multiple differences in level that he'd had to use all the muscles in his body to climb over.

All that screamed *mountain*, right?

To Leonardo, a New Yorker, this was a mountain with a capital *M*. The depths of the mountains.

He couldn't bring himself to buy that they were "headed to" a mountain from where they were.

Couldn't this place right here count as a mountain?

"You sure we're not already there?" Leonardo huffed.

"It isn't far now," Chun Lu replied, with a response that was as regular as clockwork.

This exchange was the fourth or fifth time since this morning.

Enough already, let's just say this is it, Leonardo groaned inwardly. *Settle it democratically, all right?*

"Do you suppose this place is Mount Lang Jun?"

In the end, Elias asked the question in Leonardo's place.

Nice one! Leonardo glanced at his companion, loading the look with feeling.

He really would have liked to flash him a thumbs-up, but the mountain path was leeching his energy, and he couldn't manage it. Adventurer bodies were toughness incarnate, but rock-littered terrain that featured sharp rises and dips wore down their strength of will.

Leonardo was a city kid. The only experience he had with traveling on inclined slopes was on the treadmill at the gym.

Spider-Man shot sticky webs from his hands and zipped around high-rise buildings, but Leonardo was more the type to travel on level ground, through the sewers.

Chun Lu was smiling in a troubled sort of way. "We've been on

Mount Lang Jun since last night. Everything on this side of that peak”—she pointed at a mountaintop far in the west, then slowly swept her finger around, past her feet, to point behind them—“can be said to be Mount Lang Jun, in general terms.”

I see, Leonardo thought.

...But he still wasn't quite satisfied. If they were headed for Mount Lang Jun, and this was in fact Mount Lang Jun, then couldn't they say they'd already reached their destination? Or rather, this *should* be their destination...?

He knew he was grasping at straws. This was just childish willfulness on his part.

In a word, Leonardo was fed up with this mountain track, plain and simple.

Kanami, who was walking in the lead, was in ridiculously high spirits.

She went on and on, humming in tones that were slightly off-key. Sometimes she'd seem to just vanish, and it was because she'd crouched down by the side of the road with agility so good it was sickening and was gazing at a nameless flower.

After her came Coppélia. She was carrying the bulkiest luggage of the group: a trunk-shaped magic bag. The thing was a meter square and very thick, and the fact that she was carrying it without much effort was due to sheer physical strength. Clerics were the one non-Warrior class that could equip heavy armor, and during combat she wore Victorian Armor, a maid outfit made out of steel plate. As befitted that background, her strength was set high. Even though they were the same level, her power surpassed Leonardo's.

Well, in numerical terms, even Leonardo was about thirty times stronger than a regular Person of the Earth, or in other words, than himself in his New York days. As he thought this, he jumped lightly down from a big boulder that was taller than he was, supporting his weight on one hand.

It wasn't that the mountain road was tough and his body was screaming about it.

It was more that he wasn't used to the environment and it had worn him out, or that he was bored.

Chun Lu seemed to have picked up on this. She explained, in a tone that seemed to hold a wry smile, “Once you enter the mountains, it's a series of steep slopes one after another, and you go up and down in complicated ways. It isn't like looking up from a distant plain, where you can see a clear, triangular peak. The peak is probably to the southeast; we just aren't able to see it from here.”

When he looked in the direction she'd mentioned, he saw a rock

wall so big he had to look up, and a twisted alpine forest that protruded from the cliff face.

“The five of us are Warrior classes, Weapon Attack classes, and a Recovery class, after all. If we could use Fly, I expect it would be a little different. I’m sorry I can’t be a better guide for you.”

Chun Lu bowed her head lightly, looking apologetic.

She was dealing with him a lot more politely than his initial impression of her had suggested.

“You don’t need to be so humble. I’m just not used to mountain climbing, that’s all.”

“Is that right...?”

As he spoke, Leonardo waved a hand.

True, he wasn’t good with all this nature. He hadn’t done anything like this since he was a kid and had been practically kidnapped and forced into participating in a Boy Scouts event. While he was lying in a tent that bugs kept crawling into, choking back screams, dawn had broken. The memory made him tired.

That didn’t make it okay to take it out on a woman, though. He’d be a failure as a hero if he did that.

Leonardo knew they were what had caused the change in her.

It was only natural. They’d headed to a valley where they’d been told there were several hundred gnolls, just the five of them: His party was crazy. On top of that, after they’d met up again, they’d talked about how it had actually ended up being several thousand gnolls instead of several hundred, and how they’d fought an aerial battle with a Raid-rank Black Dragon, and how they’d had a knockdown, drag-out fight with some weird new monsters. If she thought they were nuts, there was no help for it.

And actually, anybody would think that. Even I think that. It’s like, what, are we on drugs or something?

You wouldn’t want to get friendly with people like them, and if it happened anyway, you’d do your best not to make them mad. In other words, you stayed humble. Remembering the tactics he’d learned from a Japanese person, Leonardo scratched his head. His group was overwhelmingly to blame here.

“When traveling to Mount Lang Jun from Shimanaikui, there’s a slightly better mountain road, and visibility is higher. However, unfortunately, we entered the mountain from the southeast.”

That was probably why they had to travel by practically crawling through trackless ravines. Leonardo waved his hand again and told her, “We’re not worried about it.”

“Sirius Grotto was halfway up Mount Lang Jun, wasn’t it?” Elias murmured from behind them.

His voice was hard and determined.

The prickly urgency had faded, but as if to compensate, it now held a resolute intensity. When Leonardo heard that voice, he felt a little troubled.

Yesterday morning, wearing a similar expression, Elias had abruptly said, “I would like to go to a place known as Bai Tao Shrine.” Apparently, a fellow Ancient and the local residents were being tormented by some sort of monster.

Huh. Really? Leonardo had thought, but he hadn’t been particularly suspicious. It had simply caught his attention.

However, that had probably been true for Kanami and Coppélia as well. After all, this world’s monsters were based on enemy characters in the game—attacking and killing people was standard behavior for them. This had been a combat game, so that was only natural. Since the word *tormented* had been used, he assumed it was probably damaging them while they were alive, but he questioned whether it would really do something that roundabout.

Still, there was the case of the Geniuses they’d encountered the other day. It was also true that, after what KR had called “the Catastrophe,” monster behavior had been changing before their very eyes. For that reason, his only reaction on hearing the term *tormenting* was *Huh. Really? I guess that sort of thing could happen, too.*

That probably meant it was a Genius.

Hey, whoa, hold it, no, hang on. Hold the phone. We’re fighting a creepy thing like those again?! No way. Gimme a break.

“Her name was Enchantress Youren, you said? The one who requested aid.”

“Yes. It sounds as if there’s an enchanted land known as the Bai Tao Shrine on the peak of Mount Lang Jun. She said it had been seized by a magus.”

“What’s this ‘enchanted land’ business?”

As Leonardo asked his question, he was at his wits’ end.

“I expect it’s similar to a fairy village.”

The answer had come from Elias, and possibly because he’d registered Chun Lu’s and Leonardo’s gazes, he gave a few dry coughs and continued, “In the country where I was born, fairy villages are a type of legendary land. They’re special regions located deep in the forest or in the mountains and administered by Ancients. Fairies live in them, and they’re filled with old, powerful mana. Strange things happen there, and they’re treasure troves of rare magic items.”

In other words, it’s probably that kind of special zone. Leonardo had visited places like that on adventures as well, back in the *Elder Tales* era. Even if it was a fantasy game, *Elder Tales* had been built using the Half-Gaia Project. Since the geographical features resembled Earth,

the design had limits. As a result, there were special zones all over the place. In the broad sense of the term, dungeons counted, too.

Apparently, out of these zones, Ancients lived in fairy villages and enchanted lands.

“And there’s a magus...? Uh, I don’t really get it, but they’re under attack from some weird monster?”

“Do you suppose it’s a Genius?”

Chun Lu, who’d heard about that from Leonardo and the others, asked her question with a grave expression.

The answer was probably “Yes.” It was a lot less likely that somebody who’d do an incomprehensible thing like this was a normal monster.

To guess otherwise would be too optimistic.

“Never mind that, the puppy dogs. It’s a mountain with puppy dogs, isn’t it?!”

“They’re wolves, not dogs, but...”

Chun Lu responded to Kanami, who’d spun around so vigorously that she ended up twirling twice on momentum. She’d been standing at the top of the slope, and she was dancing a little jig of delight, her expression deliriously euphoric: “Fluffy and shaggy! Tons and tons of scratches!” She was hopeless. Even Coppélia stood expressionless, holding her trunk. Leonardo’s shoulders slumped.

“Hey. Kanami. You’re not curious about this? You heard what Elias said, right?”

“Yep, I was listening, Croakanardo. You mean the one about how the hidden village on puppy-dog mountain got taken over by some vague-ass person and is having a really lousy time, right?”

“Magus,” not “vague-ass,” but whatever.

She had it mostly right...didn’t she? Leonardo checked himself: She was probably basically right. Expecting accuracy from Kanami was a lost cause. The woman was as broad and fuzzy as a Texan.

“Are you not worried, Master?”

“I guess I’m not really sure yet.”

Kanami put a finger to her temple, tilting her head. Considering how reckless she was, this was unusual. Whether or not she knew what Leonardo had just thought, Kanami scaled a boulder in two or three bounds, as lightly as if gravity didn’t exist, then turned around again.

“Besides, thinking about it is lots of work, isn’t it? I mean, Eli-Eli wants to go, and I want to see the doggies. Let’s just think about it after we’re there!”

That was exactly how a Texan would think.

Leonardo pinched the bridge of his nose, between his eyes. The

type who said *We'll think about it later* was the type who wouldn't think about it then, either.

She wasn't thinking at all.

"Yes, Master. Coppélia will accompany you."

"And you! Don't unconsciously egg her on!"

In response to Coppélia's bland agreement, Leonardo put in a perfunctory retort, but even so, he followed the slight shadow—in other words, he went after Kanami—across the mountainside.

► 3

"Inconceivable..."

Elias was stricken, and the voice that slipped from his throat sounded strangled.

"Maybe it is, but there's nothing we can do about it."

"I'm terribly sorry. I had no idea it was configured this way, either."

They'd finally reached Sirius Grotto, but a huge bronze door inlaid with images of wolves blocked the entrance. Elias was kneeling in front of it.

Leonardo and Chun Lu both spoke to him, trying to comfort him, but they seemed a bit hesitant about it. Elias couldn't understand their attitudes, and he pounded the ground with a fist.

"This is exclusively for parties ranging from four to six individuals with levels between eighty and ninety."

"It's an instance dungeon, huh? The sort that gets generated temporarily."

Coppélia had checked a translucent window, and Kanami, who was peeking in from beside her, spoke up in agreement. For somebody who was handing down a sentence, her voice was pretty cheerful.

Elias understood, too. He was the one who'd tried to run in, before anyone else, after emerging from the precipitous mountains. However, this door, sealed by Adventurer sorcery, had refused him. He'd performed authentication again and again, and he had finally tried to shove it open by brute force, but it hadn't budge.

According to the words of the girl priestess, Coppélia, it was a seal that was based on level—in other words, on combat rank.

"Am I to blame here...?"

"You know it's not about blame, guy. C'mon."

His sworn friend Leonardo spoke, his hands on his hips, but his words sounded vaguely false.

The blue sky was high and clear, and the cool wind peculiar to

mountain regions was blowing, but Elias's heart was gloomy. As he was now, even the aid he'd promised the Enchantress, one of his own kind, was out of his reach.

He'd acquired his level-100 strength to save the world and the People of the Earth. If he was being rejected precisely because of that strength, what was he supposed to do? What meaning had there been in his painful training and the agony he'd felt up until now? It was as if he'd been told there was no value in his existence.

Unable even to vent this suffering—which he felt certain they wouldn't understand—on his companions, Elias groaned.

"I call first!"

"Coppélia will accompany you."

"Huh? Uh? Hey, what are those looks for? I'm going, too?!"

"Do you mean you're including me as well?"

Kanami had taken bouncing steps, pointing at her friends' chests one by one for confirmation. However, when Elias looked up, feeling as if he was seeking salvation, he was hit with a merciless declaration: "You hold the fort, Eli-Eli! There's no actual fort, but hold it anyway!"

"I have a mission to protect Ancients like myself. I must go to Bai Tao Shrine at the peak and defeat the magus, no matter what."

"But, uh, you can't get into the dungeon."

Elias had pleaded desperately, but his wish was dealt with bluntly.

"Leonardo?! Were you not my friend?"

"This isn't really about friendship, y'know?"

Leonardo glanced to the side, looking for agreement, but Kanami was all smiles, and Coppélia was absorbed in inspecting her dungeon equipment. Possibly because he'd understood this, Leonardo promised for them as well: "Hey, it'll be fine. We'll go see what's up first, and if it looks ugly, we'll be back."

"So this is reconnaissance, then?"

"Yeah, that's it, reconnaissance! Sightseeing!"

Kanami shouted cheerfully, and beside her, Coppélia impassively covered for her: "Master, sightseeing refers to tourism." ...Although it wasn't clear whether that had actually covered anything for her.

Still, once they'd said that much to him, there was no help for it.

His heart, which sent mana to him with each beat, ached and smarted, but that didn't make it all right to shove that pain onto his companions. The pride of an elvish knight wasn't cheap.

Elias was a man, and a full-fledged elf. If asked whether he couldn't resign himself to a single standby mission, the only possible answer was that he would show them by performing it magnificently. For all that, he did give a regretful sigh, but when Kanami—waving her hands wildly—and the others left, he managed to see them off.

Still, after that, Elias had too much time on his hands.

It might be a standby mission, but there was nothing he needed to do. The Adventurers routinely carried Magic Bags, and they put all their inventory in them. These bags could fit lots of things, negating weight and bulk, and they were an essential for Adventurers. Elias, an Ancient, also had a Magic Bag with higher-level mana. Naturally, Kanami and the others did as well.

Since that was the case, the party that had gone into the dungeon hadn't left any equipment or belongings with Elias because the bag was "too heavy." Since parting with KR, they hadn't relied on horses or other mounts, so there was no need to tend to them. If there was no luggage and no beasts of burden, there was no particular need to set up camp.

In other words, he didn't need to prepare or defend anything.

Elias leapt to the top of a boulder that seemed as if it would have a good view, sat down, turned his gaze to the enormous bronze door that served as the entrance to the dungeon, and stretched. His surroundings were filled with a chill that seemed to seep into his core, but the fairy blood in his veins kept it away.

Time passed slowly in the afternoons in this mountainous country. When the sun finally touched the ridgeline, it would probably go quickly, but at this point, it was only a little past noon.

"You know, this is..."

Elias smiled wryly, the corners of his mouth twisting. It was true that he had fairy blood and that he was under a curse. That was why he was strong. He had high cold resistance, and he could withstand even a Jotun's universal freezing magic, the sort that made a mountain wind like this one feel like lukewarm water.

However, he'd never thought about what exactly that was, and about what fairies were. He'd been designed not to have to think about it.

Elias the Ancient thought nothing of the cold of the icy Londinium ocean, but even he hadn't been able to shut out the chill from that other dimension. It had been self-mockery, nihilism, resignation. Every time he remembered the Words of Death, that alien chill crept up on him. It stole the momentum from his spirit, attempting to lead him toward a state of slow stillness. Everything he sensed grew indistinct, its texture draining away. It was a prison of the soul.

"No, no. That was close. No, you won't get me that way."

Elias shook his head vigorously, rejecting the thought.

His blond hair added color to the bleak Tian Mai foothills.

"Kanami gave me fire, didn't she? I can't let the Geniuses' chill get me so easily. I must gather the few surviving Ancients and protect this world to the end."

He filled the pit of his belly with strength, gripped the hilt of his beloved sword, and visualized the faces of his Ancient comrades in arms. They had all been good-natured companions. Ever since they'd disappeared into the Spatial Teleportation Device, he hadn't been able to contact them, and he had no idea what had happened to them, but he hoped they were happy— Or, no, at least safe. There must be a means to save his companions hidden somewhere on this journey to Yamato, in the Far East.

“Lord Elias.”

“Miss Youren!”

Elias had been deep in thought, and he'd lost all sense of time when, abruptly, a soft woman's voice spoke to him. The figure, which was dressed in clothes so thin that it would have frozen if it had been a Person of the Earth, belonged to Enchantress Youren. Like a nun, she wore a veil that hid her eyes, and the slim, smooth contours of her red lips were visible below it. A murky, slightly sweet scent reached him on the wind.

“I'm so glad you've come. Now that there are no Fairy Rings, I'm sure it must have been a terribly harsh journey. Traveling on foot through the Tian Mai Mountains, the desolate backbone of Zhongyuan, and the demon-haunted Blackstone Desert... My gratitude is beyond measure.”

“Ha-ha-ha. No, that's not true. This is a beautiful place,” Elias responded.

True, the journey from central Eured through the plains had brought home to him, again and again, just how enormous this world was. Wilderness that ran to the horizon, rocky desert that ran to the horizon, grassy plains with lingering snow that ran to the horizon. Still, there had been a stern beauty in them as well. He'd seen sunrises so brilliant that the contrast made the land itself sink into shadow. It had been a sight like blazing iron, something he'd never seen in the northern oceans.

“I'm terribly relieved that you are here, Lord Elias. Where are your companions?”

“Beyond the door... Apparently, this door sorts those who pass through it by their combat ranks. As a result...my fairy blood was rejected.”

Elias went on, gritting his teeth.

“My companions undertook the reconnaissance of Bai Tao Shrine, but I'm not sure how it will go.”

“Without the heroic Lord Elias, the knights who accompany you must seem rather uncertain.”

At Youren's worried voice, Elias thought, *I wonder about that.*

Kanami used her fists and that bottomless energy to shatter any obstacle. Coppélia followed her wordlessly. His friend Leonardo was kept busy dealing with the aftermath. If the skilled Chun Lu was there as well, he couldn't imagine they would lose to any old threat. Elias hadn't been worried about anything of the sort, personally, so the idea caught him off guard.

"Having lost you, I imagine your companions must also feel quite forlorn."

"Do you think so?"

"Of course I do." Youren nodded kindly. In that case, Elias thought, there was no need to bother denying it any further. It was true that, even now, he wanted to race to join Kanami and the others, and if they were expecting that much from him, of course he'd be happy about it.

"...However, in that case, I have an idea."

"Is there a way to release the seal?"

As if he'd been stung, Elias jumped down from the boulder and took the Enchantress's hands.

"No, this seal is the core of Sirius Grotto. It isn't the sort of thing that can be undone easily. Even so, although it is dangerous, there is one way to reach the Bai Tao Shrine."

"Tell me, please. If there's a way to save our fellow Ancients on the peak, I want to know, no matter what... In order to restore the Knights of the Red Branch, and also to wipe this calamity from the world."

It wasn't that he doubted Kanami and the others.

However, this was the Ancients' crisis.

The magus was a mortal enemy who was shaking the world and had plunged his companions into the sleep of death.

If possible, he wanted to kill that magus. He also wanted to shake off this pathetic, horrible, demonic chill that had possessed his heart. Kanami's fire might be protecting him, but as long as this cold existed, there would be no sunlit morning for Elias.

If he defeated the demons—the Geniuses—he could grasp it. Elias felt that, to break free from the fairy curse that made him unable to destroy enemies, it was vital to combat with the Geniuses.

"Yes, Lord Elias. So it shall be. You, a fairy swordsman of particular brilliance, even among the Thirteen Global Chivalric Orders, should be able to fight that villain who came from the east."

"Please."

Youren had politely offered to guide Elias, and agreeing, he set off, following her slender back. At some point, a white mist that seemed to have crept up from the foot of the mountain had gathered

on the surface of Mount Lang Jun. The Enchantress and Elias walked through mist that reflected the evening sun like the water's edge.

They were the very picture of a fairy summoning a sword-bearing hero to an adventure in an enchanted land.

Deserted, the great door to Sirius Grotto was eventually illuminated by starlight, and only icy cold air blew upon it.



Following Enchantress Youren, who skimmed up the rock face as lightly as a feather riding the wind, Elias ran up the same cliff. He was using a fairy martial art technique that used the air as footholds. It wasn't on the level of a flight spell, but with Elias's skill, it was easy to keep his balance in midair.

The scenery that spread above him was breathtaking.

The enormous gray rock face was as perpendicular and sheer as a standing screen. Dense green shrubs grew here and there, like ornaments, and trees with slim branches stretched out of them, as though seeking the air. Elias didn't know it, but the odd landscape bore a strong resemblance to a *shan shui* brush-and-ink painting.

It looked as if they still had quite a ways to go, but Youren turned back, tilting her head, and Elias called to her.

"I never imagined that a route like this existed."

"It isn't grand enough to call a 'route,' but..."

The two of them were currently scaling the side of Mount Lang Jun. This was the way Enchantress Youren had spoken of, the only way to reach the peak without going through Sirius Grotto.

It seemed like the sort of thing that would have occurred to them easily if they'd given it a little thought, but neither Elias nor Leonardo, Kanami, or any of the others had thought of it, simply because of the "understanding" peculiar to Theldesia: Dungeons were routes, so there was probably no other way.

In fact, once they'd started, climbing the mountain this way wasn't impossible.

The journey was extremely difficult, of course. At first, the two of them had traveled through a forest with precipitous slopes, but by the time the moon was beginning its trip down the sky, they were through that area and were looking at a hard, stony mountain, studded with sheer rock cliffs.

Now, in the stillness before dawn, they were gradually working their way up that rock face. Unless you were an Ancient or an Adventurer, and a very high-level one at that, it probably wouldn't have been possible to choose this route.

The two of them strained their ears for a little while, listening to an owl's distant cry, but once they were sure they couldn't sense any monsters that would pose a threat, they tackled the rock face again.

Elias could run through midair, but he couldn't float, and he

couldn't fly. Enchantress Youren seemed to be using a spell that canceled out her weight, or a unique ability that immobilized space.

Neither of them could stay in midair for long periods of time, so they ended up moving over the cliff face, from foothold to foothold. Of course, their speed and freedom of movement far surpassed that of the People of the Earth, but if they chose a fragile foothold, they wouldn't be able to avoid losing their purchase and falling. They were managing without much trouble, even with the disadvantage of working by moonlight, simply because their skills were outstanding.

With a sudden, piercing shriek, a monstrous two-headed bird flew at them. Elias repelled it with his sword, and the weight of the feedback told him eloquently that the monster had been strong. However, Crystal Stream had been born from fairy magic, and its effect on flying enemies was enormous. A jet of water pursued the bird, slashing at it and hampering its movements.

Youren, who'd been holding her breath, gave a sigh of relief. "That was a Rui," she explained. "They are magical, flame-attribute beasts that attack their prey with four legs."

Elias nodded in understanding. That was why the monster had fled in a panic: Water with ice mixed into it must have been pretty rough on its flame-attribute wings.

"You are truly a warrior without equal under heaven, Lord Elias."

"No, that's not true."

Elias, who'd returned his great sword to the sheath on his back, smiled with a bitterness it would have been impossible to imagine from his normal expression. The attack he'd just launched at the bird had worked because his weapon's attribute and the monster's weakness had matched up. He had too much experience in combat to assume that it had been a product of his skill.

More than anything, that had been a nearly perfect opponent in terms of attribute, and even then, *chasing it away had been all he could do.*

Even now, the fairy curse trammelled Elias. That was why he wanted to fight the Geniuses. When he'd defeated Papus, the Genius of Healing, while he'd felt the usual impatience of not being able to end things, he actually had blown the thing's slimy body away.

Just maybe...

Elias bit his lip.

A new strength might be waiting for him on the other side of this fight with the Geniuses. No, it had to be there. When faced with enemies from another world who'd stolen the lives of his comrades, even the fairy king—who hated fighting—would surely loosen his bonds.

“Lord Elias, where is your party bound, and for what do you travel?”

The voice spoke to Elias after they'd watched the monstrous bird go. He stood absorbed in his thoughts; he blinked two or three times before responding to the Enchantress.

“Now that you mention it, I suppose I hadn't told you. Kanami invited us to Yamato, an island nation far in the east, and that's where we're headed.”

“Yamato...? Why?”

“It sounds as if the land is flooded with a magic power known as ‘Homesteading the Noosphere.’ It's an ability that allows Adventurers to break through the upper limits of their combat rank. Not only that, but new spells, skills, and enemies await us there. An anomaly on that scale is occurring in that region. It may also hold a hint regarding a solution to this disaster.”

He was echoing the reasons Kanami had given him, verbatim, just after they'd met.

As a matter of fact, you could have called them a flight from a situation in which he was likely to despair, the straw that he'd clung to. However, through their adventures in Thekkek and at Ruined Colonnade Tonnesgrave, Elias had felt it clearly.

A great disaster, unparalleled in history, was about to occur in this world. It was a storm that seemed likely to rewrite the principles of the world he'd believed to be unchangeable.

Elias was convinced that what KR and the others called “the Catastrophe” was no more than the beginning. After all, the defensive operation that Elias and his companions had attempted to execute that night had failed, and terrible beings had invaded the world.

“Yamato has all these new powers. They say many Adventurers there have raised their combat ranks as well.”

“Is that so...? I must relay that tale to the Queen Mother of the West,” the Enchantress murmured.

The night at her back, she then turned and asked Elias, “What are your thoughts on this disturbance, Lord Elias?”

“The Geniuses are the cause,” Elias spit.

Belatedly, Elias realized that that hadn't been the sort of tone one should use when speaking to women. He was a knight, after all, if an imperfect one. Elias bowed his head. “My apologies. I was irritated.”

However, the Enchantress smiled thinly in the light of the moon, which was now low in the sky. “No, it doesn't bother me,” she responded generously.

In the midst of an awkward atmosphere, the two resumed their journey through the rocks.

He hadn't paid any attention to it when he was at the foot of the

mountain, but a strong, irregular wind had begun to blow.

Under weather conditions like this, even an Ancient couldn't afford to leap up carelessly. Both when jumping down and leaping up, he restricted his jumps to his own height.

Dyed with shadow in the cold moonlight, Elias asked, "The Ancients of Zhongyuan... Erm, what happened to them?"

"I wonder. Some fell; some were wounded; some fell asleep."

The Enchantress's response was brusquer than he'd expected.

The words had seemed to push him away, and Elias was rather embarrassed, but he thought they might be the woman's way of setting her feelings in order. She'd probably lost most of her companions.

"I expect we shall meet someday, at the end of an unchanging mission."

"I see..."

At the word *mission*, he had no way to respond.

For the Ancients, *mission* meant a job where they were tasked with orders to use up their lives. These were duties that must be carried out, and they had been engraved on their souls at birth. In a broad sense, all Ancients existed to protect this world and the People of the Earth. Their methods and ways of being differed, but ultimately, that was their objective.

The Ancients occasionally came into conflict with one another, but those situations broke out because their positions and approaches to problem resolution were different, and they were never so bad that they couldn't talk it out. It allowed Elias to respect and sympathize with Enchantress Youren, who belonged to a chivalric order in a different region.

"~~~~!!"

A few meters above them, they heard a hoarse scream. It seemed to belong to a girl; the dawn wind nearly shredded it, but it echoed clearly in Elias's ears.

Reflexively, he glanced at Youren. He couldn't read her expression, shrouded as it was by her veil, but she nodded once, tensely.

"It may be the magus. Take care."

"Of course!"

Reluctant to spare even the time it would take to respond, Elias sprang into motion like an arrow shot from a bow. Using the branches of a pine as footholds, he mobilized all his muscles, tearing gravity away. Up until a moment ago, he'd been moving at an efficient pace that was considerate toward his partner, but now he threw that consideration to the winds.

There were no subsequent screams, but he knew which way to go.

Behind him, he could sense that the Enchantress was moving as well, and that her speed was several notches higher than it had been before. Apparently, she really couldn't keep up with Elias's top speed.

Until just a short while ago, the world had been lit only by stars, but at some point, the darkness had begun separating into jet-black and a subdued indigo. The towering shapes of the mountains were deep-black silhouettes, and the space above them was no longer perfectly dark but instead was shifting into a hue that had a sense of transparency about it.

Here on the Eured continent, the sunlight was golden. It was one thing when it was in the noon sky, but at this hour, as dawn approached, the ridgeline was colored with gold inlay. It was a sight that was utterly different from the sunrise in the mist-covered land of the Ulster Knights Sword Alliance. The plateaus of central Eured may have been desolate, but precisely because of their desolation, they had a bleak beauty.

Elias slashed through that thin, sharp dawn light and leapt over an area where a giant boulder formed a peak. The lone figure of a knight flew into the sight of his strengthened Fairy Eyes.

He looked aristocratic, and he was wearing dark-blue armor.

Even though he stood casually, his incomparable might was palpable.

The magus's spectacles gleamed in an abnormal way, and he shook the young girl who hung suspended from his hand. Faced with the steely strength of his arm, the petite person's scream rang out with abject helplessness. The idea that he might be one of the Ancient companions the Enchantress had mentioned vanished from Elias's mind in an instant.

A magus threatening a girl.

“—D-don't eaaaaaat meeeeee!”

The moment he heard that scream, Elias ran through space toward the wicked Genius. In response to the excess of mana, his beloved Crystal Stream began to vibrate, resonating, and he gripped it tightly, swinging it down on the evil.

Elias was thinking only of smiting his friends' enemy, and freeing them.

► 5

A little while earlier, before dawn, when all signs of morning were

still far from the sky:

Krusty was also on Mount Lang Jun, at its peak, walking through the palace garden.

Hua Diao was trotting in front of him. She was short, so when she tried to walk in front of Krusty, whose height was in the 190-centimeter range, she invariably ended up dancing around him. Even so, yesterday's "vanilla" seemed to have been effective: She spoke to him merrily, with a melting smile.

"They say it smells sweet!"

"They're right," Krusty answered. Even as a kid, he hadn't been all that into desserts, so he couldn't really relate to the martenfolks' delirious dances for joy. (Although if someone had asked him, *Well, what could you relate to?* he would have been at a loss.)

There were no signs of dawn's approach yet.

They were planning to descend Mount Lang Jun and go shopping in Shimanaikui today. He hadn't been able to tell how far it was from what Hua Diao had told him, so he'd decided to leave before daybreak. It was also true that the excited martenfolk had been racing around the table, and he'd been steamrolled by their enthusiasm.

Since they were planning to pass through a dungeon overflowing with monsters, Krusty was wearing his Einherjar's Armor. The full-body, phantasmal armor, which was made of ebony steel, was practically his trademark. Its big, dark-blue silhouette appeared in raid capture videos, and it had always stirred up the emotions of players on the *Elder Tales* Yamato server. He wasn't holding a weapon, but aside from that, he'd put on all his partial armor and supplementary protective gear, and he was basically fully equipped. A cloth shopping bag he'd brought from the shrine hung from his shoulder.

Relying on the lamplight from the Bai Tao Shrine behind them and the even fainter starlight, Hua Diao—who was in high spirits—went on, walking straight past the entrance to the cavern, heading toward the edge of the garden.

This fairyland was at the peak of Mount Lang Jun.

Similar to Mount Huangshan, the World Heritage site in China's Anhui Province, the landscape consisted of sheer cliffs, terraced stone ledges, and twisted pines so dark they looked like shadows. Naturally, this miraculously cleared mountaintop garden ended as abruptly as if it had been cut off.

In short, all that lay beyond it was sky: It was a cliff.

"Master Immortal."

"Hmm."

"Shimanaikui is that way. In the mornings and evenings, they say they hold a market on their main street. I hear there's an even bigger market on Sundays. I'm sure they sell sweet things there, too."

“I bet they do.”

“Thank you in advance.”

With a sunny smile, Hua Diao ducked her head in a bow.

Apparently, this was as far as she meant to take him, and he was expected to jump off the cliff and go shopping. Putting a finger to the tip of his slim jaw, Krusty lowered his cool, scholarly eyes and thought for a moment.

Then he grabbed the collar of the heavenly official—who’d been smiling cheerfully, planning to see him off—lifted her casually, and jumped over the edge.

Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee! Trailing a scream she herself wasn’t entirely aware of, Hua Diao plummeted down a cliff face illuminated by the dawn morning star.

Her transformation had come undone from sheer shock, and she kicked and struggled in Krusty’s hand, stunned. Her smooth-furred body was wrapped in a baggy bundle of cloth, and only the obi was cinched tight.

Krusty, who hadn’t even dreamed that she’d change her shape, stuffed the cloth-swaddled otter into his bag. Personally, he didn’t sense any real danger, but if Hua Diao struggled and managed to jump away into empty space, things might get complicated.

Trapped by the bag, Hua Diao flinched and fell silent, as if she’d been startled. But soon she poked her head out, looking around.

Her mouth fell open, and it seemed as if she was about to scream again.

However, to change the trajectory of their fall, Krusty smashed the cliff with his gauntlet, and as if the impact had triggered it, she let out another feline—or possibly avian—shriek.

Even if Krusty was level 93, he couldn’t jump straight off a sheer cliff like this and emerge unscathed. He wasn’t a Monk who’d acquired Feather Fall, or a Magic Attack class who knew Fly.

Krusty’s class was Guardian, and his abilities were built around provocation that drew enemy attacks to him, and heavy-armored defense.

Not only that, but the Soul Darkening Curse, that irreversible bad status, was currently eating away at him. Considering that two of its effects were NATURAL HP RECOVERY IS SUSPENDED and HP MAY NOT BE RECOVERED THROUGH RECOVERY SPELLS, OR THROUGH FACILITIES OR ITEMS, HP recovery was bound to be extremely difficult, if not impossible. In this condition, he should probably avoid taking damage. As a matter of fact, Krusty’s current HP was only half of its maximum.

To that end, Krusty stuck his fist into the cliff wall, using it as an impromptu brake.

With his mass, it wouldn't be enough to stop him, but his momentum decreased dramatically. His high-level physical abilities gave him astounding kinetic vision as well.

Using the trunk of a twisted pine that grew from a split in the rock as a springboard and shifting to a sideways vector, Krusty aimed something like a flying kick at the rock shelf opposite them, thrusting his armored foot into it.

“Mashter Immortal?”

“What is it?”

Krusty responded to the otter, who was pale with terror and kept opening and shutting her mouth.

“Cloud...?!”

“Cloud.”

Hua Diao's question had been fragmented into a single word, and Krusty thought about it for a few moments, frowning. Then he realized she probably meant the clouds Immortals rode on when they flew. If he recalled correctly, that was an immortal wizard skill. He thought he'd seen a short story by Pu Songling about it. The martenfolk were under the impression that Krusty was an immortal wizard, so she'd probably thought he'd be able to do something like that as a matter of course.

Now that he thought about it, when Hua Diao had showed him to the cliff's edge and smiled, she might have meant *Take a short trip by cloud from here, go shopping, and come back*. The spot had only looked like the edge of the garden to Krusty, but it might have been a dedicated flight platform for Immortals.

Of course Krusty wasn't an immortal wizard, and he couldn't use skills like that one.

However, in visual terms, riding a griffin and riding a cloud didn't look that different. Come to think of it, there had been Immortals who rode large birds, too.

If using auspicious animals such as dragons, tortoises, and cranes as mounts counted as an Immortal skill, then Adventurers were probably qualified to be immortal wizards.

“The cloud is on vacation.”

“Huh?!”

“My cloud works on a three-days-on, four-days-off schedule.”

“What?!”

As she compared that with her own work environment, Hua Diao's eyes darted around in bewilderment. After making that declaration, Krusty left the cliff, which had partly crumbled into rubble, and jumped lightly down the last five meters.

He'd thought he'd made an extremely careful landing, but his

massive full armor clanged heavily. The impression it gave was as violent as a collision, if not as bad as a fall.

“Mashter Immortaaaaaaaal?!”

The otter seemed to be shrieking at every opportunity. Stuffing her back into the bag, Krusty surveyed their surroundings.

The rocky area, which was illuminated by the dawn light, wasn't the sheer cliff from a moment before.

There were still terraces that were taller than he was here and there, but red-brown dirt peeked through, and he seemed to have reached something that resembled a mountain track. A series of enormous, towering rocks soared into the air like the fairylands, making for the peak of Mount Lang Jun.

“Traveling on foot may be very difficult.”

“I think you're right,” Krusty murmured. He wasn't even worried about the return journey.

He'd jumped because it had seemed like less work, but he could have crouched and gone down a cliff like this one as well. That meant he'd also be able to climb back up. If it looked as though it just wasn't going to work out, he'd just summon his griffin. Since they were on different servers, he wasn't positive it would come, but he did have the summoning whistle in his Magic Bag.

“We haven't brought a lunch, you know...”

Hua Diao asked her question timidly, in a voice as if she were looking for instructions. “We'll eat out somewhere when we get there,” Krusty responded.

“We may find some sort of wonderful food!”

As usual, the otter's mood had brightened promptly. Holding the bag with her inside it, Krusty began his descent, sometimes leaping over the gaps between rocks, sometimes detouring around them. It was the first time he'd tried it, and he thought this bag maneuver wasn't bad. He didn't know what Hua Diao's physical abilities were like, but if she could stay in the bag like this, carrying her was a lot less work.

Hua Diao had begun asking what they'd find in town and saying that if there was sausage she wanted to have that. She was so cheerful it was hard to believe she'd been screaming just a little while ago.

“It really is all about food with you people, isn't it? Are you sure you're heavenly officials?” Krusty asked, secretly a little disgusted. Weren't they just marten officials, rather than heavenly officials?

“I told you, we're heavenly officials,” she replied. “If a person gives up their desires, they can become an immortal wizard. Since you are already an immortal wizard, Master Immortal, you aren't interested in beautiful women like Enchantress Youren or beautiful

girls like me, and even when you eat delicious food, it doesn't make you smile. It's amazing, but to be honest, I'm not jealous."

"Ah." Krusty gave a noncommittal response.

He didn't really know whether Enchantress Youren was beautiful or not. It wasn't because she hid her eyes behind that thin silk; he could tell that her appearance was generally attractive, but she didn't have that decisive feeling that would have marked her as beautiful. Her presence was suspicious. Krusty's opinion of the woman was that she was like part of the scenery.

Of course, she probably had goals or plans of some sort, but they all felt "borrowed," somehow. There didn't seem to be anything she could do on her own; she had no decisive will. Or was it possible that she didn't even have any strong desires? If she was like that, she wouldn't be able to make anything happen regardless of who for and, in Krusty's opinion, might as well have been dead to begin with.

As for Hua Diao being a beautiful girl, when he thought about it in earnest, he didn't have much reason to deny it. She was shaped like a girl, so there was no problem with calling her one, and Krusty didn't have the sort of life experience that would have allowed him to tell a beautiful otter from an ugly one. If she claimed to be a beautiful girl, his only thought was *Hmm. Is that so?*

However, in her case, her motives were almost entirely focused on delicious food (particularly sweets). Even if she was a beautiful girl, there was no point to it. Her abilities weren't connected to the world.

Of course, that didn't mean they were bad people.

Only a minority of humans were connected to the world—those individuals who tried to accomplish something based on their wills or goals, subsequently worked to acquire abilities, and consequently managed to influence their surroundings. Shiroe, the inveterate worrier who'd established the Round Table Council, was a good example. The rewards of making that choice were slight; the demands from those around him only grew, and as a result, he was forced to shoulder even more trouble. Ordinary people understood this, so they didn't choose lives in which they'd have to make big decisions.

Krusty almost began to wonder where he fell on the spectrum, but he immediately abandoned the idea.

There was nothing to be gained from analyzing himself. Personalities were no more than reflexive reactions to circumstance. The mirror was warped, and there was a little individuality in the way it twisted—that was all.

Honestly, it was probably more profitable to pursue fun situations.

"That said, I haven't exactly given up my desires, you know."

"Is that right? That tart was delicious; did it not suit your

preferences?”

After thinking for a second, Krusty spoke to the self-proclaimed beautiful girl, who'd stuck her snout out of the mouth of the bag. Hua Diao's voice had been filled with sympathy, as if she pitied him from the bottom of her heart, and he continued the conversation in a calm, perfectly natural voice.

“It's just that I like something different, that's all.”

“What sort of foods do you like, Master Immortal?”

“Well...”

“Well?” Hua Diao prompted, brimming over with curiosity. They looked at each other. Her innocent eyes were like black pearls, and Krusty responded solemnly, “...Greedy little otters, grilled whole and served with fig sauce, perhaps?”

“Huh? Dweeeeeeeh?! D-Do—”

After a moment of stunned silence, a hysterical scream echoed off the rocks, where dawn was beginning to break. His prank had succeeded.

...Possibly too well.

“I don't taste good, Master Immortal. D-don't eaaaaaaat meeeeeee!”

Hua Diao struggled, trying to jump out of the bag, and at the same time, with a big puff of smoke, she reverted to her girl form. On this slope of sharp rocks, where there wasn't even a mountain trail, that seemed far too unsafe. Reflexively, Krusty caught her by the scruff of her neck, rescuing her, just as a transparent blade swung down on him.

► 6

He immediately raised his Fresh Blood Demon Ax, and it and the great crystal sword locked blades with a dissonant metallic clang. The two-handed sword had been moving fast enough as it fell, but the blond youth who wielded it was in light armor—it might not have had quite enough weight behind it to cut him down. Either that, or Krusty's thick, full-body armor had absorbed the momentum as if it had put down roots.

In midair, their eyes met for a moment. Then the two shadows flew apart, getting some distance from each other. The attack had numbed Krusty's right hand, and as if to check its condition, he rotated his enormous bardiche once, gazing at his enemy.

He was strong.

The attack he'd just taken had been quite enough to show him

that.

He was probably outranked, too. The level on his status display was 100.

Elias Hackblade: the strongest character in *Elder Tales*. He was an Ancient hero who based his activity out of the Western European server. His own HP had already been at the halfway mark, and that one attack had taken it down even further. Guardians had excellent defense and durability, but even though it had only been a few percentage points, the damage was shocking. His opponent's damage output was on the level of a raid boss's normal attack.

"Finally. *That's more like it.*"

Krusty smiled.

"Don't waste your breath!"

The youth spit his words out sharply, then closed the distance between them in the space of a breath. Krusty evaded the blue-and-gold swordsman's attack, but the man swung that transparent broadsword as they passed each other, and it tracked him. A stream of water flowed from its tip, closing in on Krusty, who'd twisted away, until it was right on top of him. Apparently, the range of that magic sword wasn't what it appeared to be.

Krusty slammed the shaft of his two-handed ax into the stream, scattering it. Iron Bounce was a special support skill that reduced the force of an enemy attack. The damage he hadn't been able to negate completely burst on the surface of his Einherjar's Armor and dispersed.

Even so, the spray that got through left a shallow split in Krusty's cheek, like a razor blade.

The blood trickled down his face, and when it reached the corner of his mouth, he tested it with the tip of his tongue. Instantly, a restless heat spread through him.

"Elias Hackblade."

"I have no name to give to one such as you!"

This time he seemed to have used some sort of ability. Something that looked like wings made of water appeared from Elias's shoulders. Naturally, they probably weren't just for show. They had to have some sort of offensive ability.

I am being attacked by Elias Hackblade (present continuous tense).

→ He's the Ancients' greatest hero.

→ According to *Elder Tales* lore, he's one of the good guys.

→ Why is he fighting an ordinary Adventurer?

→ Someone may be controlling him.

→ He might have had a violent personality to begin

with.

- He may have misinterpreted the facts.
- I may actually be a force of evil.
 - ↑ No particular grounds for denying this.
- What are his combat abilities?
 - Far greater than those of a level-90 Adventurer.
 - He doesn't have the durability or speed of a raid boss.
 - His normal attacks have force equal to a raid boss.
 - Magical and physical attacks with a focus on water and cold air.
- Is midrange his preferred fighting distance?
 - ↑ Check into this.
- Find some way to deal with him—

A torrent powerful enough to gouge holes in rock pierced the spot where Krusty had been standing a moment ago. He'd read the attack and dodged it, but he was overflowing with an elation that made him feel as if his blood were boiling.

He didn't know why an Ancient hero had attacked him.

There was a decent possibility that it was some sort of mistake, and that if he talked to him, they could avoid fighting.

However, before he knew it, rather than thinking of a way to avoid combat, he was sizing up his opponent's combat abilities.

Where was the sense in avoiding combat anyway?

Hadn't he left fairyland because he was bored?

In that case, this encounter, and this bout, were the best opportunity he could have asked for.

He didn't have anything against the hero Elias, but crossing blades with that princely young man and crushing him seemed like a pretty interesting way to entertain himself.

If his life ran out on him in the process, that would be interesting, too.

"Master Immortaaal!"

"You hide for a little while, delicious otter. I'll deal with you later."

Knowing in a corner of his mind that what he was saying and doing was likely to be misconstrued, Krusty spoke to Hua Diao, who was poking her head out from the shadow of a boulder. He was aware that the corners of his lips were curving up. Apparently, he was smiling.

Clearly angry, Elias closed in again.

He was fast. He also launched a lot of blows. The watery wings that grew from his shoulders thrust out their ends like spear tips,

targeting Krusty.

Guardians were characterized by their defensive abilities, not their evasive ones. Since the Catastrophe, it had been confirmed that active evasion efforts increased the possibility of successfully evading. However, with this armor covering him from head to toe, he wasn't suited to acrobatic evasions. To acquire this steel defense, he'd traded away his potential for dodging.

Although that's precisely what makes it fun.

Krusty swung his ax violently, then leapt backward, leaving himself behind.

He spread his mind out, thinly.

He'd activated Hyperion Eye, his Mystery.

From his subjective perspective, just now, Krusty had split into two people.

They were Berserker Krusty, who was crossing blades with Elias Hackblade's ferocious attacks, repelling them, and actively slashing at him while wearing a ghastly smile; and Commander Krusty, who had no material body and was looking down at his other self from midair, making tactical decisions. The effect of the Hyperion Eye Mystery let you look down at yourself and your companions from midair.

Back when *Elder Tales* had been an MMO game, the screen had been the sort that gave you a view from above, the way this Mystery did. One of the reasons combat had become more difficult after the Catastrophe was that your perspective was anchored inside your own head, and grasping information had gotten harder. This Mystery could conquer that inconvenience.

Although it was convenient, it was drab compared to all the Mysteries other D.D.D. members had that Krusty knew of, and it had no decisive power. It made it easier to get a handle on the surrounding situation when he was commanding raids, but it didn't increase damage, and it didn't enhance defensive abilities. It also hadn't put him within reach of a miracle he'd never imagined before.

It was an inconsequential Mystery.

“Wha—?!”

However, Krusty dodged the blade coming at him from his blind spot by twisting half a step. Elias's aquatic support had attacked him soundlessly, but he'd evaded completely without so much as glancing at it.

He kept moving, changing the motion into an attack. The thick bardiche, as long as he was tall, writhed, wrapping around Krusty's twisted body like a whip before slamming into Elias.

Krusty had activated one of the seven trajectories for Merciless Strike without going through its command, then linked it to Aggro

Charge, intending to pry open the vulnerability *he'd discovered by observing* Elias from behind his back.

He had absolutely no leeway.

Viewed objectively, Krusty's HP had been down to the halfway mark to begin with, and every single attack was as much of a gamble as Russian roulette. Even in this moment, although he'd avoided a direct hit, a trailing barrage of aquatic daggers was continuing to inflict small wounds on him. None of the attacks caused significant damage by themselves, but Krusty couldn't hope for recovery, and he couldn't afford to ignore them.

However, what welled up inside him was savage joy.

"You're certainly strong, hero Elias!"

"That isn't the sort of thing I want to hear from a stranger like you!"

The swordsman was incensed, and his attacks grew more severe.

However, Krusty was familiar with the hearts of blade-storms like this one; they were home to him, and he found them relaxing.

He didn't hate slow-moving routines, but even so, fear ate away at him, rusting him little by little. This state of focus, in which he was gradually being driven into a corner and couldn't afford to drop his guard for a moment, had ripped his gloom away like a scab.

His refreshed, sharpened senses drew him even further into his accelerating sense of time.

Krusty, who was neither truly good or truly evil, spun the roulette wheel of combat on the only compensation he could offer, using his own life as chips.

"Conquer! Crystal Stream!! Spirits of clear water, transform yourselves into a thousand blades and shine! Aqua Thousand Rain!!"

Elias had taken a step back and charged up. His energy swelled.

As he'd announced, thousands upon thousands of high-speed water missiles flew wildly, and Krusty slammed Onslaught into them. His bardiche, which shone bright crimson, was a phantasmal weapon. It was magic battle gear of the highest rarity—only a handful had been found on the Yamato server—and as such, it was equipped with powerful offensive capabilities and an HP absorption ability. At present, when Krusty was plagued by this curse, the absorption ability might as well have been sealed, but as though to dispel that gloom, the weapon scattered shock waves around. In this head-on collision between two huge techniques, the surrounding rocks crumbled and were washed away.

However, it wasn't enough.

Krusty's HP was falling. He didn't have even 30 percent left.

In contrast, Elias still had over 70.

Even with Hyperion Eye, he couldn't completely evade all range attacks. If Elias had been a close-range physical-attack type, he would have been able to fight with a slight advantage, but unfortunately, the Ancient was a midrange fighter, and he seemed to be a combined physical- and magical-attack class. Not only that, but he even had support magic and simplified recovery spells. If the fight went on this way, he wouldn't be able to avoid defeat.

In a corner of his mind, he thought he heard a small, dark murmur say, *That wouldn't be so bad*, but he also felt as if it would be irritating to go along with it.

Krusty genuinely thought he wouldn't mind losing, but that wasn't the same as being okay with not winning.

I can't win.

- Find a way to break out of the situation.
- My combat abilities aren't enough.
- Then boost them.

More than half unconsciously, Krusty released a part of himself. As he visualized pale, sparkling, iridescent light, he felt a connection form, passing through an extremely tiny gate that had opened inside of him. Drifting in the sea that lay beyond it were countless delicate treasures, gleaming with all the colors of the rainbow: someone's recollections in liquid form.

Krusty's lips curved into a smile.

There were plenty of memories he could offer. Right now, more than that, he needed enough energy to fight the man in front of him.

It was a kind of sacrament. Recollections were memories, and at the same time, they were the yang component of the spirit energy that people were made of. In other words, they were the MP that supported Adventurer combat abilities, and the Empathiom that formed all of creation. A primordial energy that carried thoughts, transmitting them through the vacuum.

The radiance that flooded Krusty rapidly recovered his MP, and once the vessel was filled with the primitive violence it had had before being reduced to a spell, it accelerated his Recast Time.

"That power... Where did you—?!" Elias shouted, his eyes wide with astonishment. But Krusty didn't hesitate.

With the yell of War Cry, he closed the distance between them in a rush. He was converting a charging weight of more than a hundred kilograms into the destructive power of Scarlet Thrust.

MP brimmed over, dripping from his ax.

The red light of magic eroded the area, as if he'd scattered fresh blood around.

In the distance, he felt as if he could hear the sound of the surf, very faintly.

In the midst of the countless indescribable images he'd seen in the moment he was flung from the Mountains of Ouu to the Zhongyuan server, Krusty had definitely come to understand something. At this point, he'd lost it, but not all of it. Krusty knew with certainty that this technique, the Mystery that pulled rainbow light out of the void, was a clue from the opposite direction as his lost memories.

The clear realization, like gears meshing, roused delight in his mind.

It felt as if the peaceful days since he'd come to this land, during which everything had been stagnant, were being ripped apart, and he'd finally found his own path to walk.

Krusty's attack closed the gap between them, slicing through two—no, three—streams of water as tough as steel before finally locking blades with Elias's fairy sword. Both weapons had been reinforced with mana, and they bit into each other, trying to tear each other apart with a harsh metallic screech.

Even if his level was lower than Elias the Blademancer, a magic swordsman, Krusty was a Guardian, a pure physical vanguard class. That might have meant that his arm strength was greater: Little by little, as they locked sword hilts, pushing at each other, Krusty was winning the contest.

He wasn't aware of it, but the corners of his mouth had turned up, and he was wearing a fiendish smile. It was the smile of a hunting dog that had spotted its goal. In the midst of this fight with Elias, Krusty had found the enemy's tail.

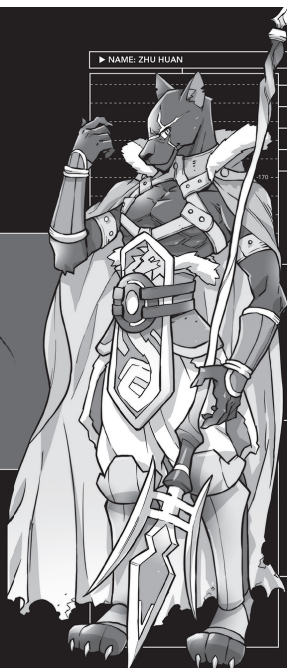
However, their contest of strength came to an abrupt end.

Both parties had an overabundance of mana, and the ground itself couldn't take it.

There was a momentary floating sensation, as if the ground had vanished, and then Krusty and Elias found themselves in the center of a collapsed basin in the mountainside. They tried to jump out, but the ground they needed to use as footholds was beginning to crumble. There was something they'd both forgotten: This mountain held Sirius Grotto, a large-scale complex of countless limestone caves.

CHAPTER.

RITUAL OF CORONATION



▶ NAME: ZHU HUAN

▶ LEVEL: 90

▶ RACE: FELINOID

▶ SUBCLASS: HERO

▶ HP: 14363

▶ MP: 7004

▶ ITEM 1:

[SACRED LANCE: RECLINING DRAGON]

A HUGE, TWO-HANDED FANTASY-CLASS LANCE WITH A UNIQUE SHAPE THAT TWISTS LIKE A DRAGON LYING ON THE GROUND. ITS WINGS WITH THE STRENGTH OF A DRAGON, THE INCARNATION OF A GREAT RIVER, AND ITS POWER THAT TWO ASPECTS: A VIOLENCE THAT GULGES OUT THE GROUND AND A FERTILITY THAT CLEANSES IMPURITY AND GRANTS BLESSINGS.



▶ ITEM 2:

[LEI LANG WOLF CAVALRY FLAG]

A BRIGHT YELLOW BATTALION FLAG THAT HAS CHARACTERISTICS AND A RUNNING WOLF MARK—THE GUILD'S SYMBOL—IMPRINTED. WHO WAS AN ILLUSTRATOR ON EMPLOYMENT AND SUPERVISED ITS PRODUCTION, AND IT'S POPULAR BOTH WITHIN AND OUTSIDE THE GUILD.



▶ ITEM 3:

[WOLF CREST LUNAR DISC]

AN ACCESSORY IN WHICH MANY SMALL DISCS OF ANIMAL BONE OR PRECIOUS STONES ARE POLISHED TO A SHINE, THEN JOINED TOGETHER LIKE A ROSARY. IN ADDITION TO IMPROVING THE STATUS OF SUBMITTED WOLF TYPE MONSTERS, WHEN BEING A MOUNT, IT'S POSSIBLE TO REDUCE DAMAGE BY BREAKING THE DISCS.





<Medicine Chest>
A box that's divided into
small compartments and
is highly portable. Keep
household medicines in it.

When they entered the cavern, the harsh cold lost its edge, and relief rushed through Leonard's group.

"Huhn. It's warmer in here than I thought it would be."

"From what I'm told, the temperature in limestone caverns doesn't fluctuate that much throughout the year," Chun Lu answered.

Apparently, temperatures underground were more stable than temperatures on the surface. That wasn't because they were in Theldesia; it worked the same way on Earth.

The interior of Sirius Grotto was lit by the pale glow of Coppélia's Bug Light spell. It was several dozen meters wide, and the ceiling was even higher than that. They were just inside the entrance, but already the space was vast.

"Bweeg?!"

With a cry, Kanami abruptly dropped into a stance that would have turned into the splits if she'd fallen much farther, then managed to hold the position, trembling.

"Master. The footing is slippery."

"I'm well aware of that!"

No doubt she was: She'd almost fallen just then. Thinking that the fact that she'd managed to tough it out in a stance as unnatural as that one was just what you'd expect from a Monk, Leonardo shrugged and went on ahead. Thanks to the rubber boots he was wearing, he didn't feel like he was in the slightest danger of slipping.

"Still, this place is pretty damp."

As he walked over slippery stone, Leonardo looked around restlessly. The space itself was several dozen meters wide, but the majority of it was taken up by a stream of water. He'd tried thinking of it as a passage, but it would have been more accurate to say it was an eroded, walkable area beside a river that flowed through a great subterranean cavern.

Not being a local, Leonardo had no way of knowing whether the dungeon had been designed that way, or if it had ended up like this after the Catastrophe. Either way, it was a sight that made you aware of the threat of nature.

The current wasn't fast, so the sound of the water wasn't harsh on the ears. On the contrary, it echoed quietly in the enormous cavern, turning into soothing background noise.

Kanami, who'd been walking in the lead, turned around several times, going slower than usual. He'd thought she might be worried about Coppélia, but apparently, that wasn't it. Her gestures were comical: She put a hand to her chin in an odd motion and held her head. She didn't look as if she was having trouble with anything, but Leonardo realized that she was, and so he wondered:

"Kanami, are you worried about Elias?"

"Uh-huh."

Kanami nodded like a little kid, and Leonardo felt mildly annoyed. "If you're going to worry, you didn't have to go out of your way to leave him there, y'know."

It was true that he wouldn't have been able to go in with them, but in that case, they could have at least tried a few other ways. If there was no other way, and they'd had to make him stay behind, then they could have taken their time, camped for the night, and talked him into it.

"Mmm... The thing is, the face Eli-Eli was making was kind of scary."

As she spoke, Kanami kicked a rock by her feet, hard. Her answer startled him.

"It was sort of like...he wanted to fight, maybe? Or maybe take stuff out on himself? That kind of face. So I thought it would be better if he stayed behind. Besides, there's just no way heading into a dark cave with a face like that could be a good thing."

Kanami spun around lightly, pulling Coppélia into the conversation with a single word: "Right?"

However, Coppélia only answered in her ordinary tone of extreme calm. "Coppélia doesn't really know, Master."

For his part, unlike Coppélia, Leonardo was feeling something very close to shock.

He hadn't thought that Kanami—who seemed like the sort of miraculous creature you'd get if muscles and reflex nerves acquired intelligence—would be considerate of others and try to resolve issues this way.

He'd thought that this Kanami-being could do nothing but cause unforeseen trouble.

Kanami just might have evolved.

...Amazing.

"Hey, Kanami."

Leonard had been planning to tell her *You're pretty awesome*, but

Kanami didn't wait for him. "You're kinda cold, Coppé, you know that?" she shouted.

"?? Coppélia is not currently under a bad status."

It was Coppélia's fault, too.

Kanami had sent her a sign that she wanted someone to pay attention to her, and she'd obviously shot her down. As a result, Kanami broke into a run, faking tears, and bolted ahead of them. She went so fast that, due to Adventurer physical strength, her wail generated a Doppler effect. Her pointlessly artistic cry echoed: "Weh-eh-eh-eh..."

This was technically a dungeon, so Leonardo thought she should be more careful than that. However, when he looked hastily around at the other members, Chun Lu—the local—told him, "There are no forks for about thirty minutes, and monsters shouldn't appear." Her calm expression showed that she'd gotten used to Kanami's weird antics.

Are you sure that's okay? Leonardo looked back and forth between his companions and the darkness up ahead, but he was apparently the only one who was worried, so he shrugged and gave up.

After all, for engineers, switching over was important.

This limestone cavern was fairly enormous. As a result, they got by without feeling any sort of claustrophobic pressure. Having lost sight of Kanami, Leonardo and the others advanced steadily through the darkness, following her without getting impatient.

"Lord Elias is like a clear spring sky, but spring is the season of thunderstorms as well," Coppélia suddenly said, as if talking to herself.

Leonardo was beside her, keeping a sharp eye out for enemies. "What do you mean?"

"Didn't you request information regarding Lord Elias from Coppélia?"

Oh, I see, Leonardo thought.

Apparently, as far as Coppélia was concerned, that exchange with Kanami was still in progress.

"Was that response insufficient?"

Her voice was as quiet as always, but it sounded vaguely sad to Leonardo. The shadows in the cavern kept him from being able to read the little expression that was framed by her glossy indigo hair. She was a petite, beautiful girl, and everything about her was like a work of art.

Feeling the emotion he always felt when he looked at Coppélia but hadn't been able to put a name to, Leonardo told her, "Your answers have lots of poetic metaphors in them, huh?" After the words were out, he felt frustrated with himself: *What kind of tactless dolt am I*

anyway?

It wasn't like this was in middle school.

"Coppélia's basic vocabulary includes meteorological forecasts and information on the four seasons from every country."

"Ah, I see..."

The memory of the night in Aorsoi when they'd talked on top of that boulder rose in his mind.

Coppélia had commented that Kanami was "a person like first light." He didn't think she was wrong about that.

That audacious woman dove into trouble way ahead of everybody else, and in the end, she arrived at new developments by force. In that sense, she was exactly like the dawn. Calling her Eos, the goddess of the dawn, would probably be going too far, though: In Grecian myth, she was such a beauty that they described her as having "rosy fingers." He thought giving Kanami an evaluation like that would be praising her too highly. She was more like the war god Ares, laying waste with a tank.

In other words, didn't that make her the type of person you couldn't have in Sales?

She'd probably manage to get huge orders, but there was no telling what she'd promise the customers.

Man, would that be hell, Leonardo muttered to himself.

Coppélia had said that her vocabulary included meteorological forecasts and information on the seasons. In other words, she was using weather reports to describe others' personalities. It was routine information that had nothing to do with poetry, but coming from Coppélia's lips, it sounded poetic. Didn't that prove Coppélia herself was poetic, instead of the words?

What sort of person is he, or she, to you?

When he actually thought about it, that question seemed really difficult, and it also seemed to hold a variety of meanings.

Like the weather, people changed. Nobody was all sunshine, all the time. People had all sorts of sides to them. As you watched someone else's shifting heart, you were changing as well.

"Coppélia looks at Master. She looks at Lord Elias. She looks at Lord Leonardo."

What's with the "Lord" business? The words had made it as far as Leonardo's throat, but the way Coppélia looked made him swallow them back down.

"Your colors are complicated, and they change continuously. In an attempt to understand them, Coppélia puts them into words. Coppélia has portraits of everyone inside herself. They are a variety of colors. They seep into Coppélia's own color and brightly illuminate her

surroundings. Coppélia is very—”

She broke off. Her eyes had been turned to the darkness far ahead, but now she let them fall to the ground at her feet. She shook her head, looking like a lost child.

“She doesn’t understand them very well.”

“I see.”

The tactless geek from New York didn’t have any fancy words he could say to her at a time like this. He’d only said the words and nodded gravely. He was the only one who’d thought it looked grave; he was aware that he was actually being awkward.

From the way she’d spoken, he thought Coppélia’s “doesn’t understand” hadn’t had any negative emotion behind it. It might merely have been a wish, but Leonardo didn’t really know.

Apparently, Coppélia had a portrait of Leonardo inside her, too.

What about him?

Did he have an internal portrait of Coppélia?

Obviously, he did.

It was a picture of a young girl with a prim face on a pale background the color of cherry blossoms.

She wasn’t wearing her best smile. If he’d had to say, her face was blank, as if she’d been caught off guard. However, if he stroked those soft cheeks with a feather pen, it looked as though she’d giggle in a soft voice and smile for him. That was the sort of expression it was.

Even he thought something was wrong with him. Apparently, his head had caught some malware.

That was what Leonardo thought.

It would have been great if the portrait of Leonardo inside Coppélia showed a sharp, cool hero, but, well, New York engineers understood that most things didn’t work out that neatly.

From up ahead, they heard a weird cry, something between a “Yeowp” and a “Gneaaarr.”

It was Kanami.

Something had apparently made her happy; sporadically, he heard a voice that sounded simultaneously flustered and delighted.

“It really is fluffers and cute! It’s just like I imagined: It’s the perfect kind of hairy!”

When they got closer, as he’d figured, Kanami was clinging to the neck of a huge wolf that had to be two meters long. The giant wolf had gray fur and an intelligent face, and it was wagging its tail in a reserved way, looking vaguely put-upon.

“...So the wolves in this cave aren’t monsters?” he asked.

“No, they are monsters,” Chun Lu corrected.

As this exchange went on, Leonardo was forced to notice that there was no battle under way. It was odd.

“Then why is it like that? All, uh, friendly.”

“I would guess...” Tilting her head, Chun Lu answered carefully, “It may be a Wise Wolf someone has already tamed. It could be acting on its own because its master is nearby. When you encounter the wolves of this cavern, combat begins, and after the battle, if it’s possible to train them, you can. That’s how it usually goes.”

Apparently, that was how it was.

Kanami seemed to have forgotten she’d just run off in tears; she’d called Coppélia over and was making her pet the wolf’s neck. Kanami herself kept hugging it tightly and nuzzling it with her cheeks.

“Hey, Kanami.”

“What, Croakanardo? I’m not giving you this one.”

“Uh, that’s right, you’re not. It sounds like that wolf’s already been tamed. It’s somebody else’s, not yours. Don’t hang all over it like that.”

“Awwww! Even though it’s fluffers?!”

The condition of its coat has nothing to do with anything. Leonardo put in the retort mentally, but it didn’t seem to get through to Kanami. She was seriously asking the wolf things like “Hey, kiddo, where are you from?”

After letting itself be thoroughly petted, the wolf seemed to feel that it had done its duty. Although it wasn’t at all forceful about it, it slipped out of Kanami’s embrace, took two or three steps, then slowly wagged its tail.

What a well-behaved wolf. Leonardo was impressed.

Its composed attitude projected dignity, showing a character that was far more intellectual and thoughtful than a half-baked human (say, for example, Kanami).

“It is a very intelligent wolf.”

As if thanking Coppélia for her comment, the wolf gave one low whine, then abruptly looked up at the cave ceiling.

“What’s the matter, huh? Was there a bat or something?”

“There shouldn’t be any flying magical beasts in this cave...”

As Kanami and Chun Lu spoke, they also looked up at the ceiling, which was shrouded in darkness. Coppélia and Leonardo looked up, too, although they didn’t speak. The wolf’s gesture had pulled them all in.

There was a soft, dry sound somewhere, and a moment later, they realized that a small rock had fallen. Leonardo and the others had no idea what that meant, and they exchanged glances—but in the next instant, a tremor big enough to make them feel as if they were floating hit the cave.

What, an earthquake?! Jesus!

The roar of an enormous mass collapsing echoed.

In the midst of an impact that shook him around, making him lose all sense of forward and backward, left and right, Leonardo caught Coppélia's slim wrist, trying to pull her into his arms.

However, he had no idea how far he'd managed it.

With a memory of falling into cold water, Leonardo's mind was abruptly enveloped in darkness.

► 2

As always, waking up brought a slight feeling of unpleasantness with it.

He didn't think he was the type who woke up feeling lousy. It was more that the existence of sleep itself was disagreeable. He thought shutting off your consciousness and resting was irrational. As far as Krusty was concerned, if you were going to spend 25 percent of your life unconscious, it would be better to just shorten your life by 25 percent and get rid of that downtime entirely.

He checked through his sensations, but there didn't seem to be anything wrong with his hands, nor, after a moment's examination, either of his legs.

It smelled very damp and stuffy. When he sat up, as he'd figured, he seemed to be in a sealed subterranean cave. The ground he'd set his hands on wasn't dirt, but slippery rock. Apparently, this was a limestone cavern. The slight stream of water he felt under his palms hinted that his situation was precarious.

His battle with Elias seemed to have ended by cave-in.

His memories up until that point were clear. Afterward, he'd probably been caught up in the collapse and lost consciousness. He had about 15 percent of his HP left. His sense that he'd had his fun spoiled was stronger than his feelings that he'd been saved from a tight spot.

There was a faint light in the cave. The source of the light seemed to be on the other side of a large rock.

As he was thinking that odd, the silhouette of a head popped out of the boulder.

"Yoo-hoo, Krus-Krus. You're awake, huh?!"

The voice was so cheerful that it seemed out of place underground.

Krusty held still for a few seconds, then responded, choosing his words carefully.

"I see you've returned, Miss Kanami."

“Whoa! Not only are you not surprised, that’s kind of a standoffish response!”

“Frankly, I feel as if I’d like to keep some distance between us, so...”

“That’s so mean!”

He didn’t think that was true.

To Krusty, she was the sort of person he didn’t dare get close to.

She wasn’t the type who’d obligingly disappear if he said the magic words, so Krusty got up, then lowered himself onto a nearby round rock, using it as a chair. It wasn’t that he found her particularly unpleasant to deal with, and she wasn’t a stranger, but she was hard to handle.

She seemed to have changed her avatar, and her class had switched from Swashbuckler to Monk. However, her form—or rather, the impression she gave—hadn’t changed much. Her blue eyes, which seemed intensely curious, were set in an oval outline. Her big mouth that always seemed ready to shout for joy was still going strong as well.

This was Kanami, “Tourist of Seven Continents,” the legendary Amazon who’d led the Debauchery Tea Party, the group that had caused a sensation on the Yamato server.

Even in the community outside the game, she was a mystery woman who’d been cloaked in countless rumors.

Many opinions of her were favorable, such as that she was the legendary leader who commanded the Tea Party, a group of specialists, and that she was an overwhelmingly charismatic beauty. However, there were more than a few—possibly based in jealousy—that were filled with spite. Or rather, to put it bluntly, it was safe to say she’d been covered in hatred.

If you were victorious in raids, you could acquire phantasms, fantasy-class items. According to game theory, large-scale, difficult quests yielded high-performance rewards. The sort of rare items that everyone wanted were extremely hard to get.

Not only that, but in the game of *Elder Tales*, you couldn’t get them by playing for a long time, or through probability, or by buying them with real money. To acquire them, you needed to be one of twelve like-minded companions. The ones who managed to pull this off were almost exclusively major guilds.

Most ordinary users thought they couldn’t get the rare phantasms they coveted because they weren’t in a big guild. Since they didn’t have the “status” of a guild, they weren’t able to acquire items. Even if they didn’t put it into words, a majority of users thought that way... Although it wasn’t that they actually believed it; they merely wanted to think it.

However, the existence of the Tea Party had flatly disproved that common sense.

Getting your friends together and going on raids is fun. If you have fun while you play, you'll get all sorts of things. That had been the message of the Tea Party, Kanami's group.

It was the truth.

Guilds were organizations composed of players, too. In the sense of assembling companions and tackling difficulties, there was no difference whatsoever between the Tea Party and D.D.D. Whether they were a guild or just a bunch of friends, in the end, it was only a name. However, many players averted their eyes from this fact and attacked the Tea Party, which charged into tough zones without adopting a guild tag. They tried to boycott the group for showing, wordlessly, that you could do it if you tried.

She and her group were getting rare items under their own steam, without being chosen by a major guild, and to the greedy majority, they were something to be hated and excluded. To those players, they were inconvenient: They made them face the fact that people who didn't attempt raids on their own initiative were short on energy and communication.

To Krusty, even the phrase "the legend of the Tea Party" was laughable: Now that the Tea Party had disbanded, their own pangs of conscience had simply substituted the "legend" for the history of their ugly boycott. It was no more than a fabrication.

That said, not only had Kanami paid no attention to that malice, she'd made no attempt to even know about it. As the leader of a raid organization, Krusty had run into her several times back then, and so he knew her: This woman was absolutely not the type to be influenced by that sort of public rumor.

She was a lot harder to deal with than that.

"You know, for some reason, nobody gets startled about this."

When he looked at her, prompting her to go on, Kanami said, "KR was totally blasé about it, too."

Krusty thought she probably had only herself to blame.

Everything she did was unprecedented, and so no matter what she did, the people around her had just stopped being surprised.

"I imagine he assumed that, given your skills, it was possible."

"I see."

Kanami laughed—"Eh-heh-heh!"—and Krusty put just a little more distance between them.

Ordinary people didn't cause trouble for their friends. At the very least, they tried not to.

For that reason, getting closer to someone could serve as a way to

decrease the damage they did to you.

Once in a blue moon, there were people who tried to cause trouble for their friends in particular. Putting distance between yourself and those people was a way to lessen the damage.

On the other hand, Kanami was the rare person for whom—as far as Krusty knew—neither affection nor coolness had any effect on the amount of damage dealt. As a matter of fact, the amount of damage was determined by the frequency with which you interacted with her: The woman was like a type of natural disaster. Her one saving grace might have been that she also spread around good luck, in addition to damage. Apparently, that didn't have anything to do with a psychological sense of distance, either. No, the friendliness Kanami scattered in her vicinity was the type that didn't take the recipients' wishes into consideration in the first place. She was a terribly bewildering monster: In a sense, by the time you met her, she'd already seeded the area with fortune and misfortune.

It is a big world.

He couldn't deal with her, but she was unusual.

She was like a rare character that was difficult to encounter.

The wide world held singularities a youngster like him couldn't handle, such as people who were inscrutable menaces (like his grandfather), human natural disasters like Kanami, righteous men like Isaac who were moved by personal convictions rather than profit and loss, and people like Shiroe, who endlessly invested resources to solve problems. They just didn't seem to go the way you wanted them to, but that fact gave Krusty a mysterious sense of satisfaction.

“What are you doing out here, Krus-Krus? Weren't you on the Yamato server? There was an earthquake; do you know anything about that? Oh, hey— Waaah! Geez, I'm sorry, okay?!”

Kanami's rapid-fire barrage of questions had been shut down by the huge Wise Wolf Gumon, who'd caught the hem of her clothes in her teeth and forced her into a pratfall. As if saying, *Never mind, just calm down*, Gumon wagged her abundant gray tail in front of Kanami once, then pushed her damp muzzle into Krusty's palm and, satisfied, settled her large frame down at his feet.

“Is that little one a friend of yours?”

“Yes.”

“She's really smart. I was unconscious for a while myself, but she dragged me out; she was a lifesaver. She's intelli-cute! It looks like she knew where you were, too, Krus-Krus.”

“Did she?”

Krusty scratched Gumon behind the ears. With the generous attitude unique to large dogs (?), still lying on her side, without even

opening her eyes, she wagged her thick tail as if to say, *Don't worry about it.*

“Why are you here, on the Zhongyuan server? Did you keep your return secret?”

Flatly ignoring the questions Kanami had tossed at him, Krusty asked her questions of his own. He wasn't trying to be mean, but he didn't feel as if there would be any profit in giving Kanami information. At this point, he should probably prioritize gathering information.

Whether or not she knew what Krusty was thinking, Kanami began to answer, saying things as she thought of them.

“It's not that I came back in secret, not really, but I did it on the Western European server, you know? Besides, I'd retired because I was going over there, too. It's far away, and I figured that stuff would wait until I'd grown a bit, and then I just sort of never made contact. Oh, I came back in February or so. Then after that, there was that huge Catastrophe mess, right? On top of that, I didn't have everybody on the friends list for this body. So then I wasn't able to make contact, period. Then Eli-Eli was frozen in an iceberg, so I rescued him, and we picked up Coppé-cat in a wilderness of flowers—”

Apparently, it was Kanami's fault that an Ancient hero was here.

“Oh, Eli-Eli is Elias Hackblade. He's this blond, super-duper-dishy guy, you know, the cover character!”

He knew.

Cover was the word you used with books, while for a game, it should have been *jacket* or *package*, but he knew what she was trying to say.

“And then we met up with Croakanardo in the Tekeli Ruins, and KR was there, too, but it sounds like he went back to Yamato. Now we're traveling with this local girl named Chun Lu, so there's five of us!”

The only thing he fully understood from that was that none of this really counted as an explanation.

“Then there were these things called Geniuses, and we fought 'em, and we won! ‘We Are the Champions’!!”

Kanami's words brought a flickering image with them.

A golden woman.

...If it was all right to call something with a blood-smeared mouth, disheveled hair, and the striped limbs of a tiger a “woman,” that is. A man-eating noblewoman, buried under luxurious accessories — Shoving down a sharp headache through habit, Krusty smiled slightly.

The enemy.

This might also be a product of Kanami's influence. Without intending to, she sometimes brought benefits to the people around her. And this time, he'd gotten another clue of some sort. He didn't know what it meant or when it would prove useful, but apparently, he now had more enemies. If the word *Geniuses* had been the key, then it was probably lurking in his lost memories.

"What are you grinning about, Krus-Krus?"

"It felt as if I'd heard something nostalgic, that's all."

"I see. So you say average stuff like that, too, Krus-Krus! That's a surprise."

There's no call for me to take that sort of treatment from you, Krusty thought, but he looked at Gumon's wagging tail, considered the subject of maturity, and rephrased his remark.

"And just what sort of person do you think I am?"

"Well, you know..."

Kanami turned her eyes to the ceiling, put her index finger to her lips as if she were remembering something, and began to speak: "Sort of..."

"...hard, and huge, and..."

As a Guardian, that was only to be expected.

"...sort of like you'd shoot beams from your glasses with no expression on your face? In other words, you know, like a super-robot!! Like the Terrifying Megalo-King Robot from Mars!"

Krusty gazed at Kanami steadily.

It wasn't as if he had no idea what she was talking about (although the bit about the Martian robot wasn't clear). That said, even if she told him that, there was almost nothing about it that he could fix, and since fixing it would be a nuisance, he didn't want to anyway. Still, it was informative, as well as persuasive enough that he thought most people probably did think of him that way.

"Good for you, though, Krus-Krus. Way back when, it felt like you kept putting up with stuff so you wouldn't cause trouble for people."

Kanami swung her arms in circles, then cocked her head.

"In the ages it's been since the last time I saw you, you seem like you've loosened up. That's great. Although you've got a weird 'bad status' curse on you. Stuff like that has nothing to do with enjoying life, though, huh?!"

Apparently, that was how she'd thought of him in the past.

She probably wasn't that far off the mark.

For Haruaki Kounoike (aka Krusty), the son of a mistress, standing out was not an option. While he was studying abroad, surveillance was lax, but after he returned to his home country, he was subjected

to unpleasant interference in practically everything.

Krusty had no intention of cutting into their profits, and he didn't want to participate in the main family's business. What he had wanted was to be left alone, but the reality was that it wasn't going to happen. His grandfather and ██████ had high expectations for him (illogically, as far as Krusty was concerned), but he wondered, feeling rather ironic about it all, whether that wasn't a lack of self-reliance, in a way. After all, they were trying to make an illegitimate outsider resolve their family's recklessness, which had gotten to be too much for them to handle.

In some respects, Krusty had played *Elder Tales* as a sort of camouflage. He'd thought that, if he acted like a bohemian who was obsessed with online gaming, the people around him would give up on him. To Krusty, who had been forbidden to devote himself to anything, *Elder Tales* was his "revels and dissipation."

If he'd seemed to be constantly putting up with things to avoid making a nuisance of himself, even in the game, he was ashamed of his petit bourgeois self.

The walking disaster in front of him had probably just guessed at random and said whatever came into her head, but even then, she managed to come up with things that ran people through this gamut neatly. It stood to reason that the group she'd led, the Tea Party, had left a battle record that shredded the rankings.

Krusty didn't think he'd loosened up after arriving on the Zhongyuan server.

It was because he'd come to Theldesia, a world where the Kounoike main family didn't exist.

He couldn't just do as he pleased, but he was able to act a lot more freely than he had in the other world. He knew the freedom was temporary, but it did make him want to chew things to bits.

He was like Gumon. Even if he could tolerate lying down in the hope of finding peace and quiet, he didn't want to be chained up.

Krusty thought he might be cynical, but he had absolutely no intention of mending his ways. He stood, adjusted his glasses, and spoke to Kanami.

"If that's how you see it, I'm glad. It looks as though I've aged out of my patience. Shall we go aboveground, so I can continue my hobby? Apparently, someone's worrying about me as well. Forgetting doesn't make things go away. —I'd prefer not to, but until then, it looks as if it would be best for us to stay together."

“Achoo!”

“Have you caught a cold, Princess Raynesia?”

“Has the cool wind chilled you?”

The two young ladies, Apretta and Fevel, were frowning at Raynesia in concern, and she waved her hands slightly, denying it.

“No, not at all. Water Maple Manor is warm, after all. I’m sure it was because my father and mother are gossiping about what a failure I am, back at home.”

Raynesia, who was seated on an incredibly fluffy sofa that had been made by the artisans of Akiba, gave a little smile. She didn’t have to smile very broadly. This sort would get through to fellow People of the Earth aristocrats just fine, and ladies preferred it for its refinement.

In Akiba, where the winds of early summer had begun to blow, Water Maple Manor towered majestically on the town’s main street as the guest house for foreign dignitaries and the official Akiba residence of the Eastal exchange official. In a compact, comfortable drawing room, reached by crossing a crimson carpet, three ladies had assembled and were enjoying their first animated conversation in quite some time.

Today’s guests were Apretta, the daughter of Marquis Lester, and Fevel, granddaughter of Baron Sugana. Because they were all relatives of the lords of Eastal and belonged to the same generation, they had made their society debuts at the same time the previous year, at the Lords’ Council. Since then, they’d deepened their friendship by exchanging letters. Partly as a result, the atmosphere of the visit was genial, and although she was conducting herself as though it were official business, to Raynesia, it felt like a bit of a vacation.

“And how did you find the town of Akiba?”

Feeling a little nervous even so, Raynesia asked them a careful question.

The atmosphere in Akiba was, frankly speaking, too much for her to handle.

Every day, explosions went up here and there, enigmatic fliers and booklets streamed in from who-knew-where, and even the shops opened new locations, or remodeled, or vanished before anyone knew what was happening. Having no history meant, in a way, that everything was like a dream. The face of the town changed on a daily basis.

Adventurers dressed in outlandish garb (she was told it was armor and magic equipment), would recruit companions in the square in front of the guild center or under the Great Silver-Leaved Tree, then abruptly sit down and begin selling their combat trophies, right there

in the open air. This was also an everyday occurrence.

Even if she put it mildly, the town was a seething mass of lunacy, and Raynesia couldn't possibly control or take responsibility for it.

However, on the other hand, she didn't want people to hate it. The timid question she'd asked the aristocratic girls had been an expression of these complicated feelings.

"It's, it's simply—!"

"It's wonderful!"

Whether or not they knew what Raynesia was thinking, the two began to speak, beaming and shaking their clenched fists slightly.

"What do you suppose it is? That sensational foodstuff."

"It's sweet. Sweeter than cream made with the finest sugar and milk."

"Vivid herbs in a rich bouillon, supported by a soup as robust as the earth!"

"One mouthful and it feels as though you'll melt, body and soul!"

"The full-bodied harmony of small dried sardines and *safa* broth!"

When what they said was mixed together, it was completely incomprehensible, but the lady-in-waiting who'd shown them around managed to guess that they probably meant Milk Pudding and Yes House Ramen, where they'd stopped while they were in Akiba. Apparently, the two of them had encountered Akiba's gourmet foods.

Gingerly, Raynesia sent out a further probe.

"Wasn't there anything dangerous or raucous?"

"Dangerous?"

"Raucous?"

The two girls looked at each other blankly, then began to speak, reviewing their memories of the day.

"In terms of dangerous things, I would say the number of items on the menu."

Apretta quietly closed her eyes—which slanted down at the outer corners—in rapture, folding her small hands as if in prayer, and continued.

"Princess Raynesia. Are you familiar with 'ramen,' a soup dish that has four types of main ingredient, two types of broth, and three types of topping with which one can vary the flavor? On principle, one would have to eat it twenty-four times before one could understand it completely."

Her voice was as serious as if she were speaking about territorial defenses, and Raynesia also straightened up, firing herself with enthusiasm. If she didn't do that, she felt as though she'd fall off the sofa.

"Rather than raucous, I would say the town is lively."

With a determined expression, Fevel smiled, her cheeks flushing

until they were the color of apples.

“During this one day, I saw more Adventurers than I’ve seen since I was born. The Adventurers laugh a lot, and they like music, don’t they? No matter where you go in Akiba, little sounds reach you from some unknown source.”

Fevel praised it with a blissful expression.

When she heard that, Raynesia finally felt relieved. She’d had a lady-in-waiting whom Elissa had trained show them around the town, so if there had been any trouble, she would have contacted them promptly. She’d also been given a report that the pair had enjoyed themselves, so she hadn’t been terribly worried. Although, she hadn’t known whether the town had made a good impression on them.

Apretta and Fevel were noble girls who were Raynesia’s pen pals, after a fashion. In the course of their correspondence, the two of them had taken an interest in Akiba, and they had been wanting to visit for a while now.

Raynesia had also wanted to invite them for quite some time, but in this world, travel was a serious affair. The residents of the domain had to stay near their farmland or risk losing their livelihoods, and nobles needed to make arrangements for the formalities and security personnel, which meant that travel required large-scale plans and preparations.

The Adventurers, who set off for far-flung places that would take weeks to reach without even giving it much thought, were exceptional beings.

The girls’ visit had finally happened because Adventurers from Silver Sword had volunteered to escort them here, and they would be able to meet up with the Lords’ Council on the way back. Naturally, the fact that Marquis Lester and Baron Sugana had been moved by the girls’ entreaties had been a significant factor as well.

“I’m very pleased you found it to your liking.”

Raynesia thanked them, feeling a strange delight.

She wasn’t the one who’d created this town, and as a rule, the Adventurers wouldn’t listen to her. Still, she’d lived here for more than half a year now. She’d experienced their kindness, just as much as their outlandishness.

Even if they were her pen pals, these girls were related to lords by blood, and it was possible this would influence imports to Akiba. They might affect the town, either positively or adversely.

To Raynesia, the Adventurers of Akiba were unbelievable epicureans. She’d heard that quite a few of them spent over half of what they earned on meals. The marine products and rice that came from Marquis Lester’s and Baron Sugana’s territories were probably

important to the Adventurers as well.

Aside from these political motives, she hadn't wanted the two of them to dislike this town. No, not just these two: anyone. This was the first place Raynesia had ever been posted to.

"By the way, Princess Raynesia."

With a smile like a flower, Fevel enthusiastically changed the subject. Beside her, Apretta was chuckling in a way that, while adorable, wasn't suitable for an aristocratic young lady.

Feeling apprehensive for no real reason, Raynesia stiffened on the sofa and tilted her head. "What is it?" Being able to respond elegantly on reflex in absolutely any given situation was her specialty. In aristocratic society, this ability was both a powerful weapon and armor, but right now, it was no help to her at all.

"What's happened between you and Sir Krusty?"

"Is he hiding?"

"How is your relationship progressing?"

"Is he in bed?"

Fevel was making fun of her, but Apretta's straightforward questions were hard to parry. Raynesia camouflaged her dry laugh by turning it into a cough, focusing even more of her attention on her expression. It was the gesture of feigned innocence that earned her description "the royal shrine maiden of the silver moon, lamenting the twilight."

"During the capture of Seventh Fall, Master Krusty vanished from the turmoil of the battlefield."

Raynesia let her gaze fall to the table.

If they looked into her eyes, they might stumble onto the fact that she wasn't all that worried.

As a matter of fact, it was ridiculous to wish for Krusty's safety.

He was the sort of person who'd spread chaos and grown drunk on blood in the midst of the great goblin army. Worry from a fragile Person of the Earth like Raynesia probably wouldn't be of any use to him.

In the first place, she was really more irritated than anything.

She was being subjected to questions like these because that bespectacled menace had gone missing without permission. Apretta and Fevel aside, a barrage of similar inquiries and concern was raining down on her. The idea that Krusty was off skipping work somewhere (that had to be it!), shoving the troublesome role onto Raynesia, made anger boil up inside her.

"He's—vanished?"

"I hadn't heard a word about that!"

"I'm very sorry. Since it involves the Adventurers, I was unable to

write about it in my letters.”

The two of them had given thin, ladylike shrieks.

It was probable that, as befitted sheltered young ladies, they were imagining a strong, noble knight being swallowed up by a monster horde, fighting valiantly, but collapsing in a pool of blood, no longer able to move, and breathing his last. *Even though it's nothing of the sort*, Raynesia thought.

He was bound to be idly drinking tea somewhere, enjoying his holiday (the sort Raynesia couldn't take!) to the fullest.

Disguising the fact that she hadn't sent news of Krusty in a letter because just thinking about him was annoying, she went on in a heavy tone.

“I'm pitiful. Do forgive me, please.”

The words she'd murmured with downcast eyes had meant *Do you think we could stop talking about this now?* but it didn't seem to have gotten through to the good-natured pair.

“You must have been so lonely, Princess Raynesia.”

“I, Apretta, couldn't bear it if my beloved knight vanished in battle.”

Their worried expressions sent a twinge through her heart.

She wished they wouldn't put it like that. She really wasn't worried at all. She was simply irritated because he'd disappeared with no warning, and if he'd just send word about how he was getting along, she wouldn't mind a bit if he stayed missing.

No, that wasn't true. Both his disappearance and the fact that he'd left without permission were problems. It wasn't fair that Raynesia had to do all the bothersome official duties alone. Krusty should be toiling away, too. If he hadn't disappeared, this would never have happened. Unforgivable.

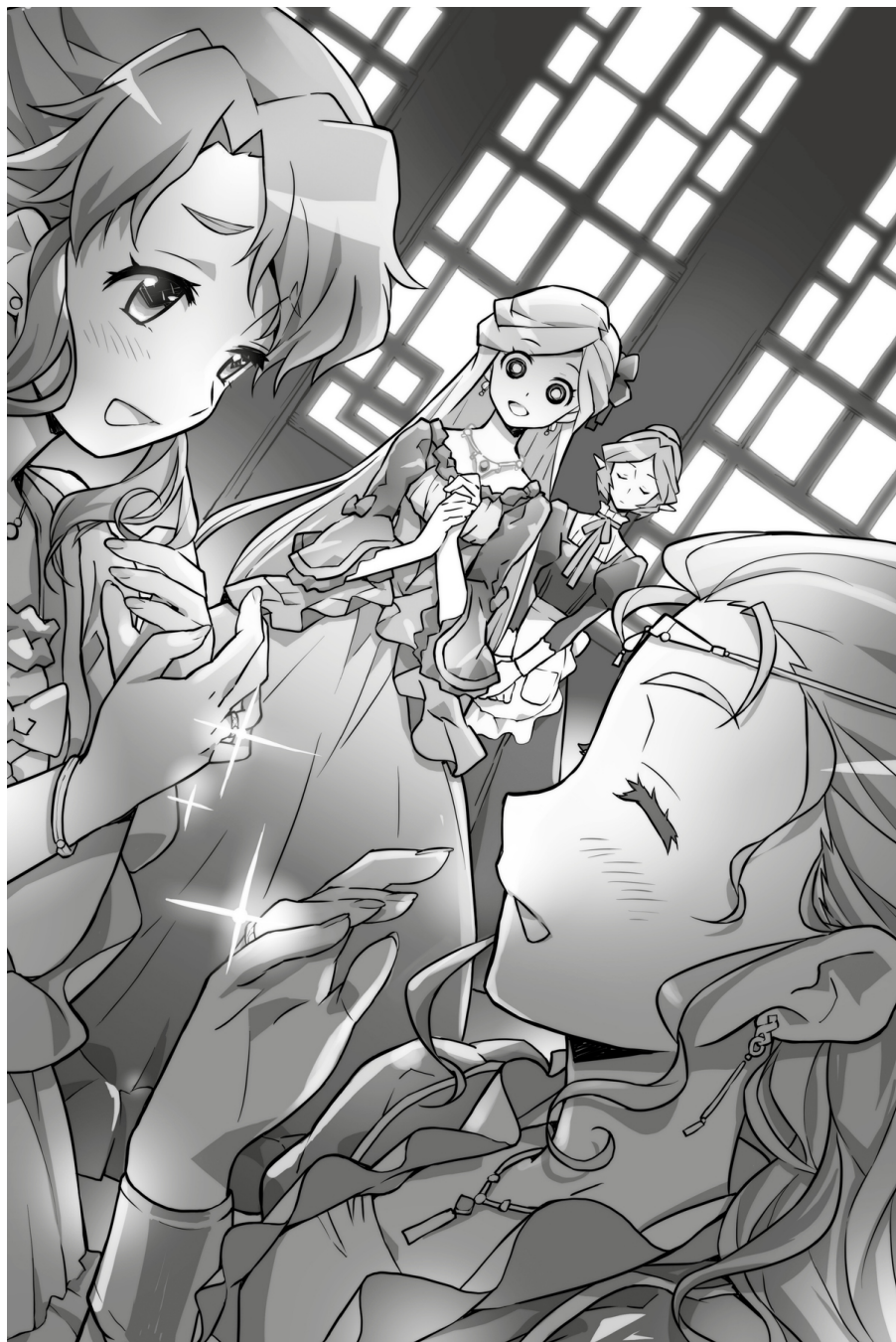
In a word, what Raynesia was harboring wasn't unease or worry, but the desire to see an injustice redressed. If he was a knight, shouldn't he carry out his duties? When she thought about it that way, she grew even more disgusted. And anyway, what was that “beloved knight” business about? It was like something out of a story. Apretta was too much of a dreamer.

“...Huh?”

However, Raynesia—who'd been taken aback by the word *beloved*—noticed a silver band on Apretta's slim finger. Then, when she slid her gaze over to check, she found a similar item on Fevel's hand.

She couldn't believe it, but it was a fact.

Tiny, simple, silver circlets.



Raynesia knew. They were jewelry known as “rings,” meant to be worn on a finger.

Elissa, who’d been waiting by the windows, nodded once, keeping her eyes downcast. From the way she looked, she seemed to be saying, *You’ve spotted something good, Princess.*

“Is it possible that, um...you two are...?”

“Hmm? Oh. Um.”

Dusk was approaching in Akiba, and golden lamplight streamed into the now-silent drawing room.

In the space of a breath, Apretta flushed bright red. Next to her, Fevel was squirming, her hands pressed to her cheeks. The silver rings on their fingers were unmistakable proof that they were engaged.

“Yes. That’s right. Erm... No, no, no, no, this isn’t, um, it isn’t much of a ring, you know? He isn’t a great general like Sir Krusty, or a great hero; he’s merely one of the domain’s lowly knights. Exactly! Because we struck a deal close to home, and this was the result.”

“You say that, Apretta, but I seem to recall you splitting that pudding with him.”

Not only that, but apparently, he’d traveled here with them.

“You were boasting about your fiancé, too, Fevel! About how he was wonderful, and how soft his hair was. About how he was the strongest in the domain. And on top of that, he even gave you a cape!”

Hers as well, then.

“Yours picked out a hair fastener for you, didn’t he, Apretta? Here, Princess Raynesia, this is the one. ‘Pearls suit your hair,’ he said.”

This was not in the report, Raynesia thought, but that probably wasn’t because the lady-in-waiting had been remiss. Nobody would think to report lovers’ sweet nothings. Especially not if the contents were the sort that would cause heartburn.

The strength was draining out of her.

Raynesia felt like praying. *Why am I the only one who has to end up in a situation like this?*

Her expression grew sad, for a reason that had nothing to do with Krusty’s disappearance. When they saw her, possibly because even they regretted what they’d done, the other two ended their conversation instantly. Relieved, Raynesia forced a smile and raised her head.

The way she looked seemed to have been interpreted in a way that was absolutely unrelated to her internal state. Even Raynesia didn’t really understand, but it was the reaction described as “the noble silver princess, enduring sorrow.”

Apretta and Fevel began apologizing: “I’m terribly sorry, Princess

Raynesia.” “We’ve made you witness such a shameless fuss, when you’re unable to contact Sir Krusty.” “No war god of his caliber would lose easily. Do cheer up, Princess Raynesia, please.” “If you lose heart, Sir Krusty will be too worried to kick the enemy to pieces.”

That would never happen, all right? Master Krusty, losing. Or being troubled. And on top of that, there’s absolutely no way whatsoever that he’d be concerned about me!

Looking down, Raynesia was assailed by that sort of irritation, and an odd loneliness. She didn’t really understand, but it was probably the stress of conducting official business all on her own. Her chest had begun to hurt, and she stopped being able to give responses that befitted the daughter of a noble family.

Why did she have to feel this unfair emotion? Princess Raynesia of the dukedom of Maihama just couldn’t understand it. In all the time since she was born, up to the present, she’d never felt like this, not during any sort of party or strict lesson, or even during the hectic whirl of official business in Akiba.

It was a wretched, dreary feeling that prickled at the inside of her nose and stuck in her chest, making it ache.

The only thing she understood was that all the blame lay squarely with that mind-reading menace.

► 4

“Dammit to hell!”

Don’t screw with me. Don’t you dare screw with me.

Zhu Huan, guild master of the Lelang Wolf Cavalry, mentally cursed as he and his Wise Wolf raced along.

Thin, silklike fragments were beginning to drift from the low-hanging clouds, dark like India ink. It was powdery snow—unlike the heavy, wet stuff, it didn’t sap his strength directly, but it danced in the wind, obstructing his vision. In the midst of it, two columns wound through the wilderness, long and snakelike. This was the group Zhu Huan was leading.

As he watched, the distant mountains faded into dim silhouettes.

It would be hard to run all night in weather like this. They’d need to find a place to camp. Even if they couldn’t sleep, if they didn’t warm themselves by the fire and get something hot to drink, even if they were Adventurers who boasted inexhaustible strength, they’d freeze. On top of that, the breed of Great Wolves that the party was riding had limited active hours.

The hard ground, which was covered in dead grasses, was like an accumulation of the cold itself.

The wolves headed west, kicking round rocks that had been hidden in the shadows of the grass. On the other side of the thick clouds, the sun must have set, because the cold had grown more severe. The Cold Resistance sigil on the mantle he'd wrapped around himself was emitting a wavering, aqua-blue magic light. It was a seal invested with magic that warded off the cold.

The sigil had been carved in by a Sigilmancer, in order to make a production-class magic item. Back when this had been a game, because their low performance limits had kept them from being a match for secret-class items, production-class items had been treated as stopgaps for middle-ranking Adventurers. However, at present, people appreciated that they could give you the exact abilities you wanted, so they were used on a daily basis.

Wrapped securely in these cold-resistant mantles, the elite Lelang Wolf Cavalry unit plunged through the pale darkness and swirling snow.

When they stopped to rest, it was just before midnight.

This vast wasteland held extremely few places that were suitable for camping. There were a few basins and ruins that blocked the wind slightly, but there were no guarantees that these would be conveniently located on their route. The normal routes for traders ran between places like these, using them as stepping-stones. However, all that was required from tonight's journey was speed, so they just kept pushing west through the wilderness.

Conditions were bad as well.

The flurries of fine snow had thoroughly chilled the ground, and on top of that, it was beginning to get wet. All they could do was pile up thick carpets—even though they might get damaged—without holding back, and set up curtains as windbreaks. The band began their camp by digging up the hard, rigid ground with their sword points, starting a fire with a flame spell, and hanging a pot over it.

While this was a rest, it wasn't so that they could actually sleep. They were toughing it out for a few hours, in order to get through the coldest time of the day.

Quite a few of the lower-ranking wolves ran out of time and vanished into the darkness. They'd need to wait four hours before they could summon them again. The members who had middle-rank mounts with summoning times of over forty hours had buried themselves in their reclining wolves' fur, sharing what little warmth there was. On Zhu Huan's orders, the members who had even higher-ranking summoning pipes went on ahead to reconnoiter, breaking off

their precious rest with nothing more than a cup of plain hot water, and they melted into the darkness.

“GM, will we catch up to them?”

Asking about the current situation, a swarthy-skinned member’s voice was tense. It wasn’t the way he usually spoke, but on a frozen night like this, it was understandable. In the darkness, his companions’ eyes were turned his way, faintly reflecting the glow of the flames. Everyone wanted an update on the situation.

“Ma Bao, the sub-guild master who stayed in town, sent an additional report. As we figured, it wasn’t the Singing Sword Company. It’s the Ruby Qilin. The Red King faction picked a fight.”

“What’s going on? Did they attack?”

“If this turns into war, it’ll be as ugly as it gets. There are five thousand of them. Shimanaikui doesn’t have a decent defensive wall.”

“Hey, Chief,” called a rough voice. “Don’t tell me we’re running.”

Zhu Huan shook his head. “Of course we’re not. We worked hard to get to that city, and we’re finally used to the place. Like we could actually throw it away! Shimanaikui isn’t just a base for exchange between the east and the west. There are lots of People of the Earth living there, too. We’ve even got a few married guys in the guild. It’s real irritating, but you know we can’t break them up.”

Who are those guys?! Getting girls—now that’s inexcusable behavior. Zhu Hua smirked at the cheerful jeers.

“On top of that, it doesn’t look like it’s gonna be that easy for ’em. See, their goal isn’t Shimanaikui. Or, well, it’s probably on the list, but they’re after something bigger. According to intel an old friend of mine who stayed back in Yandu leaked to me, it’s pretty likely it’s the Ritual of Coronation.”

“The one that rewrites the ownership for the whole surrounding area?”

“But that’s a guild war, ain’t it?”

“There’s no ‘ain’t it’ there. It’s a guild war, period. The bastards just touched off an all-out guild war, and it’s gonna pull in the whole server.”

The Ritual of Coronation was the climax of the guild wars system. If a guild offered prayers from one of the Coronation Altars built in several areas, then expended the guild points they’d earned previously, they could rewrite the right to rule over the whole surrounding area so that it belonged to their guild. It was a variation on the zone purchase system that had been implemented in *Elder Tales*; it was a high-level system that could affect a wider range.

Of course, if another guild stole that altar and conducted a new

Ritual of Coronation, they'd lose their sovereign rights, but the authority was attractive, and they'd want to protect it even if it meant beefing up their defenses.

During the days of the game, only very limited areas had been stages for guild wars. They were Shanghai's equivalent, Dadu; Beijing's equivalent of Yandu; and Yangdu, the equivalent of Guangzhou.

The wide areas that had these player towns at their centers had been the "rewards" in the guild wars. Next to these reward areas, there had been combat areas that were equipped with perilous mountains and Coronation Altars. The guild that conquered the combat area could conduct the ritual and claim the reward. That had been the outline of the guild war system.

However, that wasn't how it played out in reality.

Zhu Huan continued.

"At this point, we don't know whether it's been like that since the days of the game or not, but those three altars weren't the only ones. Or, well, they might have multiplied, but... Anyway, altars were discovered in every area. Mount Lang Jun is one of 'em. The guild wars turned into real wars."

The "coronation" was a ritual in which a king notified heaven and earth that he had ascended the throne and gave thanks that the world was at peace. In a manner of speaking, it was a declaration to all of creation that a king had been crowned. In that sense, it was understandable that it made for a fitting "final blow" in a guild war. In ancient Chinese history, it had famously been performed by the first Manchu emperor. On that occasion, it had apparently been conducted on Mount Tai Shan, a mountain that was considered sacred in Taoism.

That said, the coronation didn't necessarily have to be held on Mount Tai Shan. That was how it was in Theldesia, at least. If that had been the case, there wouldn't have been Coronation Altars in three different places.

Evidently, there was no law that said those three places couldn't become four or more places, either.

"From what I hear, all the mountains where the Coronation Altars are located have legends that say they're connected to fairylands. Well, I mean, you're reporting in to the heavenly immortals and the gods, so I guess they'd have to be. After all, in this world, unlike that one, we've got "immortals" in the form of the Ancients. So, see, if you follow that link, Mount Lang Jun fits the description, too, which means—"

The Crimson King faction had set their sights on that altar.

Zhu Huan told his companions so, flatly.

True, this situation might have been better than a concrete war. For example, if Shimanaikui became the stage of a raid for the Adventurers, not only would the town's facilities and its precious farmland be destroyed, but it was very likely there would be deaths among the People of the Earth. For the Ritual of Coronation, Adventurers could just settle things with other Adventurers in combat areas: places with no production facilities, such as the wilderness, the mountains, or dungeons.

However, on the other hand, it was a terribly cruel system. At a time when the rights to ownership of the city in which they lived were being affected, the People of the Earth and Adventurers who didn't have the scale or the combat strength to participate in raids couldn't even resist.

It was possible for their fates to be decided before they were even aware of it. That was exactly what was going on now.

"According to the report, there are about thirty of them, same as us. Guild wars are like raids, so they probably got all their elites together. Mount Lang Jun hasn't been confirmed as a raid zone, but we won't know until we check it out."

In ordinary Rituals of Coronation, guilds or guild alliances fought in combat zones, and the guild points they won as a result were offered at the ritual altar. The contest of forces in the combat zone was confirmed again in the ritual. However, that method was used to overturn the sovereignty to an altar that had already been occupied, in order to sufficiently weaken the defenders while simultaneously earning a lot of points. This time, since nobody had found the altar yet, the ritual would be conducted by the first ones there.

Even if the opposing forces had already completed the ritual, if they launched a surprise attack immediately and drove them off, they'd be able to conduct another ritual by offering a few guild points. However, the more time passed, the firmer their system of defense would be, and the greater the amount of guild points they'd have to pay. That was precisely why the Lelang Wolf Cavalry group was racing through the dark night.

"GM! Hey, Chief!"

Time crept by, with Zhu Huan unable to allow himself to sleep. In the midst of that frustrating rest, the chime that alerted him to a telechat sounded in his ear.

The scout who'd sent it was speaking in a low, stifled voice. The telechat was reproduced in the hand he held up to his ear—in order to block the surrounding noise so that he could concentrate—as if he were using a smartphone from Earth.

"Bad news."

“What happened? Trouble?”

Zhu Huan asked that particular question because the scout's voice was hushed. Regardless of their name, telechats weren't a telepathic ability. In the *Elder Tales* days, they'd been an ability known as “Whisper,” a function that would convey words you spoke to someone registered to your friends list. Since it was, as the name said, an ability that delivered your voice to the other's ear, in order to send a message, you had to speak aloud.

The Lelang Wolf Cavalry was a guild noted for taming enormous wolves, then summoning and riding them, and when you were riding wolfback, it was pretty noisy. When you were slicing through the wind and you tried to talk to one another, you inevitably ended up yelling. This was true when speaking through a telechat as well: When you were competing with the sound of the wind, your voice got loud, no matter what you did. This was why the guild members were said to be macho and coarse.

The fact that one of those members was speaking in a low voice meant, first off, that he clearly wasn't riding at the moment. In addition, in this vast wilderness before dawn, if he had to hush his voice even further, it was likely he was involved in some kind of crisis.

“I dunno. I dunno, but, GM...our problem may have gotten solved already.”

“What do you mean?”

“It's the Crimson King faction. They actually did set up camp, about an hour ahead of us. They're all gone now, though.”

As the scout made his report, his voice was shaking. Zhu Huan could hear an edge of dread in it, more than fear, and he steeled himself, tensing his abdomen. Apparently, something big had happened.

“I think it was a raid enemy. There was a black cloud with bird cries coming out of it. I heard thunderclaps and saw tiger claws. They fought it, and they drove it back once, but there was this bright-white light. —It got them, took out the whole unit. The Crimson King faction went to the temple, every last one of 'em.”

Ordinarily, he might have been relieved to get that report.

After all, the Crimson King faction, which had been trying to gain control of this area, had retreated.

Of course they'd probably dispatch another unit in the near future, but this area was far from central Zhongyuan. It would take them ten days or so. In a tense situation, that was a crucial time difference. It was enough time for Zhu Huan and his team to conduct the ceremony and solidify their defenses.

However, what was the beast that had appeared in that report?

Only raid enemies could wipe out raid units. Did that mean a field boss had appeared? It had been a year since he had come to this world. It had been more than half a year since they'd arrived in Shimanaikui, even, but he'd never heard of any magical beast like that one.

Naturally, it was possible that the report was exaggerated, or that the darkness had unsettled the Crimson King faction and they'd been routed. However, Zhu Huan really didn't think that was the case. Would an elite unit that had been prepared for a guild war be completely annihilated because they'd gotten a little startled?

Something fearsome had happened.

The night in this bone-dry country of grasslands, where confusion was deepening, apparently hid an incident that was much more unsavory than he'd anticipated.

► 5

Leonardo was close to falling to pieces over his unexpected good luck, and he clamped down hard, controlling himself. As a geek—and a gentleman—he had to deal with this coolly.

Calm down, compose yourself, don't smirk, and don't sniff out loud.

A head that seemed very small was resting on his shoulder.

Coppélia's body was too delicate, and as he held her close, it felt as if he had an overabundance of arm. She was thin and lithe, and she seemed terribly fragile, rather than soft. He would have liked to savor that sensation, but it felt as if he'd end up breaking two or three bones if he did, and it made him terribly careful and nervous.

Leonardo shook his head hard, but he twisted his body gently—taking care not to wake Coppélia—and took some cheap Moon Fay Drops out of his pack, sprinkling them around his eyes, one-handed. These eye drops were made by an Apothecary, and they made your eyes see in the dark as well as a cat's for a whole day. Since he was using a consumable item, it had higher performance than an Assassin's special skills. Technically, they could have just made a Magic Light, but Leonardo was a melee attacker, and that was too much for him to handle.

As far as Leonardo's eyes were concerned, the pitch-black darkness softened to the level of a moonlit night. Of course, since the Balm didn't improve his actual eyesight, he didn't know what the sealed space they were in looked like in its entirety. However,

Leonardo could sense dense matter beyond them, as an invisible feeling of oppression. Something unpleasant was lurking out there.

On the other hand, the girl he'd pulled close in a reflexive attempt to protect her during that collapse didn't seem to have taken any noticeable damage. The clean line of Coppélia's cheek, her little cherry lips, the eyelashes that were always lowered in the shadow of her bangs—all these things shone palely, so close he could have kissed them if he felt like it. This particular situation was gratifying.

Hey, now's not the time. You should be handling this crisis more resolutely!

Leonardo shook off the temptation and began to act.

After all, being a hero was a thankless job.

Taking another careful look around the area, he confirmed that there were no impending threats.

They'd definitely been buried alive, but since he could hear water running somewhere, it probably wasn't a completely sealed space. If he'd had to say, he was more concerned about a secondary collapse or some other additional disaster.

He wanted to go explore the area, but it would mean setting Coppélia down on the ground, and he was hesitant to do that; he couldn't make up his mind. He felt a resistance to the idea of laying a delicate girl down directly on a cold, damp, rock-littered surface, and frankly, it also seemed like a waste.

Kanami, who put ideas into action just as soon as she thought of them, hugged Coppélia on a routine basis—like when they were riding on horseback, for example—but (naturally), Leonardo didn't get opportunities like that. That didn't mean it was hard for him to let go of her... Well, actually, that's exactly what it meant.

Man, I am seriously uncool.

Leonardo compromised by holding her sideways, then sat up, peering into the darkness.

"So we managed to survive somehow."

There was a small reaction to his murmur.

When Leonardo looked down, in the midst of his pale field of vision, her white, thin eyelids opened slowly, revealing eyes like liquid jewels. They blinked several times, then found Leonardo.

"Good morning, Sir Leonardo."

"Morning, Coppélia."

Feeling awkward for some reason, Leonardo hastily averted his eyes as he spoke. Coppélia didn't have night vision abilities, and in this darkness, she wouldn't notice he was blushing. That was a relief.

"We got caught up in a collapse," Coppélia murmured, confirming

the facts.

The girl seemed to be mentally putting her memories and the circumstances in order, and instead of responding, Leonardo waited patiently for her to settle down. After about ten seconds, Coppélia chose Bug Light, a spell that summoned a light.

“Coppélia is able to walk.”

At those rather brusque words, Leonardo set her down on the floor of the limestone cave. He didn't think she meant anything by it, but the things Coppélia said were very direct sometimes, and Leonardo, who was aiming to be a hero, felt that they whittled away at his spirit. He almost asked her to give more emotional responses—a demand that even the apps he made didn't fulfill.

The direction of the gravity in this space—in other words, the rock they stood on—tilted significantly, and although it wasn't a problem as far as standing up went, it was bad enough that if they dropped something small, it was bound to keep rolling forever and get lost in the darkness. The limestone had a unique texture, the sort of smoothness you'd expect from a living creature. He wasn't sure whether the lime had melted or accumulated, but in any case, he'd seen on some sort of documentary that these things were made by flowing water, which resulted in that smoothness.

“Do you wish to be healed?”

“Uh... Yeah, but heal yourself, too.”

Coppélia had tilted her head as she asked her question, and he took a look. He didn't know whether the damage had been from the fall or the impact, but his HP was down about 20 percent. He'd figured something on that level would recover naturally with time, but as Coppélia looked up at him, he checked her HP, too. Area Heal surrounded them, softly illuminating the cave's interior.

When she'd finished her spell, not seeming at all afraid of the darkness, she began walking up the slope.

“Hey, hold on a second. That's not safe.”

“Coppélia detects no hostile entities in this space. Coppélia thinks we should reunite with the others as soon as possible.”

“Well, yeah, but I mean...”

The lead spot was dangerous, and he wanted her to let him take it. Leonardo's feelings didn't seem to have gotten through to his companion; she kept walking without turning back.

“Aren't you scared, Coppélia? Because it's dark, or because this place might collapse...”

After mulling it over, the girl responded, “Coppélia's vision is not affected by darkness. The data stream is stable.”

Is that how it is? Leonardo thought. Come to think of it, this

mysterious girl had explained to him before that her vision was different from his and the others’.

“Can you see through walls with those eyes? Like the exit of this cave. Or a map.”

“Coppélia seems unable to perceive anything not in the range known as ‘visible light.’ However, it is possible to expand and display estimated vectors from her sight history.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Currently mapping two hundred and ten sets of vectors in the composition of her current field of vision. From the shape, areas with sufficiently stable instances may be considered trustworthy.”

Leonardo scratched his head. From the gist of the conversation, he thought she probably meant *For now, this area won’t collapse*. To be honest, he hadn’t understood half of that.

However, as he listened to Coppélia’s voice, his irritation and unease disappeared in a curious way. *I guess there’s no sense in worrying*. Leonardo rolled his shoulders, switching his feelings over.

Even listening closely, the two of them were moving through a subterranean cavern so still that the silence seemed as if it would suck them in. It was a strange experience. The stuff under his feet had to be solid (and pretty hard) limestone, but as he walked along in the faint, soft glow of the magic lamp, Leonardo felt somehow light, as if he were in a dream or an illusion.

Through the unfathomable commotion known as the Catastrophe, he’d been pulled smack into the middle of an epic. It was unusual for him to be thinking like this, but he felt as if he was in a fantasy. This was partly because the scenery he was seeing right now was far too much like something out of a fairy tale, but more than that, it was because he was walking beside Coppélia, an innocent young woman.

Walking next to a girl I like is just as fantastic as a dungeon collapsing? How sad am I anyway? That makes it sound like I’ve never had a single girlfriend.

Laughing at himself, he scratched his cheek with his index finger, then sighed, shoulders slumping.

Well, there was no help for that. In his old world, the only women he could remember talking to recently were his manager (with her triangle eyebrows), the industrial doctor (with her triangle spectacles), and the clerks at the deli, who were from India (a country shaped like a triangle).

“As the boulders fell, Coppélia saw Lord Elias in the direction of the sky.”

“Yeah.”

His response sounded an awful lot like a sigh.

She was right: During that collapse, the sky had opened up abruptly, and Elias had been there.

He'd been brandishing that enormous sword that sparkled like a crystal, challenging something that shone vermillion. It had been for less than half an instant, but Leonardo had seen it, and Coppélia said she had, too. In that case, it had probably been real.

"Lord Elias looked—"

Coppélia's words vanished as though the darkness of the cavern had absorbed them, and she didn't finish the sentence. The girl's shoulders slumped dejectedly, and she seemed bewildered. It made Leonardo feel the same way.

"That expression didn't look good on him, did it? Even in the ghetto, you don't see stuff like that much these days... Well, you probably do once in a while, but still. Seriously."

Remembering Elias's face, Leonardo forced out the rest of a sentence that didn't want to emerge. It was a truly unemotional comment. He couldn't criticize Coppélia.

What had that expression been anyway?

Why were he and Coppélia feeling like this?

Elias Hackblade was a real hero. He protected the world of Theldesia. However, that was from the perspective of the People of the Earth.

To the Adventurers, Elias Hackblade was an Ancient they were unexpectedly close to. He featured in the package art. He showed up in all sorts of quests, guided the Adventurers, gave them advice, and sometimes fought alongside them. In other words, they had plenty of opportunities to come into contact with him. His appearances were so frequent that, in a way, he was more of a regular than the nameless village blacksmiths they visited.

Of course, that had probably been for the convenience of the game. When the whole place was swarming with monsters, when they'd been attacked by a ghost ship and their boat sank, when an immortal snake king had scattered miasma around...Elias had appeared. He'd shown up to shout, "Come, rise up! Illuminate the darkness with the radiance of justice," and race onto the battlefield.

Since *Elder Tales* had been a game, all sorts of cataclysms and huge incidents had occurred. Sealed monsters were released. Ancient, evil magic items were stolen. Demihumans invaded. These were all common events. Most People of the Earth grieved over these things and resisted them desperately. After all, back then, no matter what they personally thought, that had been the role they were meant to play.

With every crisis, Elias—who had been cast as a hero in the same

way—would yell, “Now is the time for a counterstrike!” He had definitely looked gallant and heroic, but he’d also seemed rather fictional, in a way that provoked wry smiles. Always straightforward and never losing his optimism, the elf fit the part too well.

When Elias had encouraged the Adventurer Leonardo from inside the game screen, he’d seemed like a reckless hero who spoke of hope without really thinking.

Naturally, he didn’t mean that this was bad. On the contrary, it was why people had loved Elias. Elias Hackblade, who was widely viewed as a prominent candidate for “strongest hero in Theldesia,” had been called “the charging elf,” “the drill sergeant,” and “Mr. Elias” by the players. In chats, on bulletin boards, and on video sites, he’d been teased in all sorts of ways, and more than that, he’d been loved.

This was because, in the end, everybody knew.

The optimistic way Elias spoke and acted had its roots in the convenience of *Elder Tales* game production. If he hadn’t been that way, there would have been no one to bring Adventurer-players into the story. His unfortunate points—the rule that kept him from finishing off monsters, the way he was fated to slip up at crucial moments and leave things up to the Adventurer-players, and the ridiculous amount of odd, mismatched background information he was loaded down with—were also there for the convenience of the game. After all, if it hadn’t been for those things, the protagonist of the story would have been Elias, not the players.

In that sense, Elias’s encouragement and his busy efforts were nothing more than expedients. In other words, a farce. However, for that very reason, *Elder Tales* fans loved his excessive sense of mission and his mistakes. Fans all around the world cheered for this handsome clown of a hero, who was the first one to charge into the thick of trouble, yet seemed somehow haphazard.

And now...

Elias’s tear-streaked face, as he was torn in two between his manufactured sense of mission and his manufactured flaws—whose fault was that? Who should he accuse, and who should he press to take responsibility?

Leonardo had realized that, in a Theldesia that had lost *Elder Tales*, that answer didn’t exist. Elias was just like Leonardo and the other modern players who had lost the call center, their “gods’ consulting service.”

If victory was defined as achieving his objective, then Elias was currently a loser.

He'd stuck his sword into the rubble-littered mountainside and sat there, as if clinging to it, but it wasn't a matter of appearance. He'd wanted to rescue his comrades and had challenged the magus to combat, and yet, he hadn't managed to annihilate the magus or save his comrades: That was his defeat.

Not only that, but destroying his surroundings to this extent could be nothing but defeat for an Ancient, a guardian of the land. Elias felt helpless, as though something powerful that had filled him was leaking away.

However, the despair that clung to that helplessness wasn't as great as he'd anticipated.

On the contrary, he was smiling faintly, as if he was somehow relieved, as if it all made sense to him. It was unpleasant, self-mocking loneliness, and if put into words, it might have been *I knew it*.

A sense of rotten comprehension.

It was a disgusted, contemptuous thought. The idea that this really was the extent of his strength.

His sense of time was hazy, so he wasn't certain, but he thought that several hours had passed since that collapse, at dawn.

In the instant they lost the ground, Elias had tried to end the battle with a huge attack that gave no thought to his own safety. He'd attempted to strike that indigo-steel magus, who boasted fearsome strength, with Quad Aqua Harpoon, the highest-power attack he could make with his sword. It had been a reckless offensive.

The Fairy Arts Elias used triggered phenomena that were almost like magic. In his case, combined with the attribute of the weapon he used, it was an attack technique that manifested as water and ice. However, Fairy Arts was Fairy Arts, not magic. No matter how far you went, it was a martial art and a combat method. After it was launched, magic would have struck home automatically or pursued the opponent, but Fairy Arts had no such ability. It was a sword technique, and so he had to use subtle handling to make his attacks hit home.

Under those circumstances, he hadn't been able to do that, and the attack he'd steeled himself to make had done nothing except pointlessly spread damage.

On a slope that looked as though there had been a great earthquake or a landslide, Elias smiled, faintly and bitterly. It was an emotion far more vicious than despair.

If it had been despair, he would only have had to fight. If he roused himself, even if he couldn't win, it would turn into a trial of

strength. However, this ironic feeling of understanding and acceptance was coming from inside him. No, this shallow smile was Elias himself.

Somewhere along the way, he'd begun to feel a strange correspondence.

What was the fairy curse?

In a word, it was a cage.

A prison that separated Elias from victory.

"You are unable to inflict damage above a certain level upon your opponents." Why did a ridiculous curse like that exist in the first place? Wasn't it obvious that as long as that curse dwelled in him, he wouldn't be able to score even the smallest victory?

This was what he had sensed, vaguely. Wasn't he a being who would never have any wish granted? Protection, victory, aid: All these things had been placed carefully out of his reach beforehand. Wasn't that what he'd been born as?

This doubt had clung stickily to Elias, soaking in, ever since this journey began—no, ever since the night they'd gathered for their assault on the Great Stronghold of the End—and he couldn't rid himself of it.

Compared with *this body, which had most likely been a true counterfeit*, how dazzling the Adventurers looked: *They could make even their counterfeit bodies real*. He envied them so much.

"He was strong," Elias muttered.

The figure of the indigo steel magus, the mortal enemy he'd crossed blades with, rose behind his eyelids. He'd been a living weapon, and as he attacked, he'd swung that enormous bardiche, a weapon as long as he was tall, like a storm. His strangely shining eyes had held not anger or hatred but simply a grotesque craving.

Elias had probably had the upper hand of that battle from beginning to end.

Objectively, that was how it must have been, but Elias hadn't felt that way at all.

No matter how much he attacked, all he could do was shave away his enemy's HP.

HP was life energy. If it ran out, combat would be impossible, and you would die. To Adventurers, death wasn't absolute, but in terms of winning or losing, it would be decisive. In other words, shaving HP away should have been not a metaphor, but a path to victory.

...And yet, the light in that magus's eyes had ignored that principle. All he could think was that the other had ignored the difference between their HP and had been focused on something else. If the act of shaving away HP didn't lead to victory, how was he supposed to wrest victory from his opponent?

“Was that... Did he stretch out his hand and grasp power? Power from where? Twisting the rules...”

Still, if he'd shaved them away entirely, even that magus might have stopped moving.

However, he'd done something strange. It was true that Elias hadn't seen a vision that would point him toward victory, but he couldn't imagine that the magus had had one either. On the contrary, defeat should have been the only thing that lay in his future... But that man had extended an invisible arm and grasped some sort of great and terrible power, inviting it in.

The mana that had filled the magus, and that invisible power.
What had it been?

At the very least, it had been something Elias didn't know, a thing that lay outside the bounds of the laws that ruled all creation. If it hadn't been for that, Elias's attacks would have put an end to the magus before the collapse.

“Why is he so incredibly free, when I, a knight of the Red Branch, am bound by a curse? Is that the difference between Adventurers and Ancients? Or, no, is it the difference between him and myself...?”

When his faded fighting spirit had left him, all that remained in Elias was envy.

He couldn't even struggle. The cage got in his way.

However, even when that man was on the brink of losing his life, he'd had the right to fight recklessly. Since that was something that had been put out of Elias's reach, it was dazzling.

“Lord Elias.”

“Lord Elias.”

A faint voice came to him on the wind, over and over. When he raised his eyes, vacantly, Enchantress Youren was there, her thin silk streaming in the wind.

At this point, a sense of shame finally resurfaced inside Elias. Even if he couldn't feel regret for his own sake, he had Ancient comrades on this mountain.

“Is your body all right?”

“Yes. I'm fine.”

Elias got to his feet as he responded.

So that it could carry out Elias's thoughts, his body was sturdy. The damage he'd taken in that fight was already recovering. Even Crystal Stream, whose blade had been chipped and cracked, was being repaired by Elias's own mana.

“Is that so...? What a relief. For a little while, I was afraid you had been swallowed up by the magus's dreadful plot.”

The Enchantress had approached across the unstable slope in slow, curious motions, and she thanked Elias with a respectful curtsy. Her long, glossy black hair slipped free of the thin silk, fanning out, and the transparent light of the mountains illuminated a beautiful, bewitching sight. Elias, an elf knight, wasn't from the sort of culture that would make a woman kneel, and he hastily caught the Enchantress's arm and helped her to rise.

"I'm sorry. I failed to kill the Genius—the magus."

"I saw."

The Enchantress's casual words sent an unpleasant twinge through Elias's chest. It felt as if someone had thrust an iron rod into a festering wound, and while it was nothing he couldn't endure, the pain held an uncomfortable heat.

He didn't know its true identity, and he apologized again.

Elias was the leading member of the Knights of the Red Branch, and a user of Fairy Arts. On top of that, right now, he had to be the most elite of the surviving Ancients. That was the equivalent of an absolute mission: He had to rescue his comrades without fail and banish the darkness from Theldesia.

Now, when he had failed to do that, the only thing Elias could do was apologize.

Watching Elias, the Enchantress thought for the space of ten full breaths, then spoke. "No, there was some sort of extraordinary power at work in that battle." Maybe she wasn't confident, either—she spoke carefully, choosing her words.

"He must have used some wicked technique and toyed with his own life force. That was the power of the rainbow."

"The power of the rainbow...?"

Her response triggered an association in Elias's mind. Those fragments of light the magus had radiated in the last stages of the battle... The fragments had looked as though the colors that hung in the sky after rain had been hardened, then shaved thinly; they must have been the Power of the Rainbow that the Enchantress meant. As if in exchange for that, all of the crazed warrior's abilities had skyrocketed.

The murmur that had escaped him was one of confirmation, rather than doubt.

However, the Enchantress seemed to have heard it as a question. She answered it in an admonishing tone:

"It is the inborn power that gives life to everything in the space between heaven and earth. It is the power that creates and raises everything, the strength that helps one to overcome difficulties. It is also the power that links people with the earth, and the enchanted

lands with the moon.”

“Why is a Genius able to use such a power?!”

If what the Enchantress said was true, that power could be called the ultimate energy. It was linked to mana and physical strength, the earth as represented by volcanoes, the sky that encompassed lightning, and every other great power.

“By rights, that power belongs to the enchanted lands—in other words, to you and the rest of the chivalric orders. That man has acquired it simply because he unfortunately gained control of the fairyland on this mountain. As a result, many martenfolk were lost...”

“Rgh!”

Now that he thought back, the light emitted by the Spatial Teleportation Device that the technical knights had repaired had been iridescent as well. Deep down, that light and the cowardly power the Genius had used were the same. That realization led to a further memory. The great magic tree in the fairy village, and the alv ruins at the bottom of the sea, and the missing Sacrament Sword, which had been stolen—hadn’t they all been cloaked in rainbow light?

Elias realized that the iridescent light was something like the world’s mana. He had been taught that the techniques the fairies used were far closer to the world’s foundation than crude skills like magic and sorcery. However, it was said that ordinary humans could never learn them. To Elias, who had mastered fairy techniques that were that difficult, rainbows also meant the power of fairy blood.

When it came to the world’s mana, Elias—the fairy swordsman who borrowed the natural powers of earth, water, fire, and wind—was inferior to a magus.

That rainbow radiance was also the light that appeared when lives were lost.

Did that mean the man was a god of death?

“That man made further use of that power to control the kin of the wolves. There’s no doubt he’s plotting to search for the ruin, the television station, that lies hidden in this mountain. If he takes the altar in the television station, the Ritual of Coronation will occur. Once that happens, this entire area will fall under the dominion of the magus.”

“...”

Elias bit his lip.

His combat power was first-rate. He prided himself that his equipment was also made up of first-class articles, imbued with magical abilities.

But he remembered the indigo-steel man’s wide, crazed eyes. The eyes of a starving beast who sought only combat, who would use both victory and defeat to fuel the flames. Elias admitted that those eyes

had overawed him.

In the first place, Elias was bound by the chains of a hero. Even though he had the strongest abilities, the fairies' curse ate away at him, distancing him from victory: That was Elias. He'd had everything. Was victory the only thing he lacked, and the one thing no amount of wishing would ever get him?

Inevitably, even if Elias defeated that man, would it lead him to victory? He, the strongest. He, the head knight of the proud Thirteen Global Chivalric Orders.

"...Do you lack confidence?"

"That's not—!" Elias shouted reflexively, feeling something claw at the pain in his chest.

Enchantress Youren's delicate lips tightened, very slightly. That expression was one Elias had never known before, and it was something he feared more than anything:

Distrust and disappointment.

Elias finally understood the meaning of the festering wound in his chest that spit out miasma: It was the terror of being abandoned by the world. The darkness that lay there was the complete opposite of the indolence the Geniuses had beckoned him to, and yet, in essence, it was exactly the same.

Would the strongest knight be discarded as something unnecessary?

In the first place, why had a "strongest" anything who'd never once been victorious been considered necessary up until now?

What on earth had Elias misunderstood? He couldn't possibly be the strongest if he'd never won, could he?

Elias, who'd bitten his lip so hard he'd gone pale, was currently in the very midst of terror. It was the first time the fact that he couldn't win had cornered him this badly.

"Lord Elias. Listen carefully, please. Your strength is still necessary to save this world. I am aware that you harbor pain in your heart. However, that pain itself is a qualification. That's right: It qualifies you to rule heaven and earth."

With a gesture that made it look as if she was praying, the Enchantress whispered to Elias with nearly intolerable slowness. It was a guidepost as thin as a needle that showed the way to salvation, so that Elias could retake his qualifications as a knight.

Elias grasped a proposal that he would have been able to brush aside if it had had the mercilessness of an ultimatum.

"Conduct the Ritual of Coronation. If you do, a portion of the power of the rainbow will be yours, Lord Elias. It is the spiritual power that is the source of all creation. It will surely remove any curse, and I am certain it will soothe your anguish."

That's right. Elias nodded with a bitterness that smelled like iron.

He didn't need the curse that bound him anymore.

This was the first time he'd heard that term, *the Ritual of Coronation*, and it held a gloomy attraction for him, as though a fragment of the world's secrets had been sealed into it.

As far as Elias was concerned, he hadn't put his full trust in this sorceress who whispered to him, but her tempting words had a powerful magnetism, and they seemed to hold a glimmer of truth. If that was the power at the source of the world, then it was sure to be able to shatter and discard even the curse that bound him.

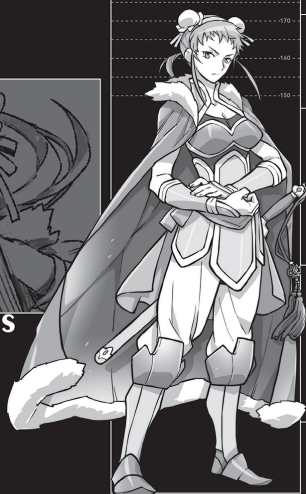
Elias nodded, his face pale.

In order to slay his enemy, he would obtain the power of the rainbow.

CHAPTER.



CARTOON HEROES



▶ NAME: CHUN LU

▶ LEVEL: 90

▶ RACE: HUMAN

▶ SUBCLASS: FRONTIER INSPECTOR

▶ HP: 10830

▶ MP: 9889

▶ ITEM 1:

[AUSPICIOUS, JEWELLED HAIRPIN]

A QUIET YET GORGEOUS TWO-PRONGED HAIRPIN FROM BRICK WHITE JEWELS. PAINTED LIKE LIPS OF THE VALLEY. HANG! IT'S CONVENIENT FOR PUTTING YOUR HAIR UP. BUT ITS POINTED SHARP MEANS IT CAN BE USED AS A SHARP WEAPON AS WELL. A PRODUCTION-CLASS ORNAMENT THAT SAGITTARY RAISES THE ITEM DROP RATE.



▶ ITEM 2:

[CHINA ROSE DANCING ARMOR]

ELEGANT LEATHER ARMOR WITH A DESIGN THAT SEEMS TO BE BASED ON A DANCING COSTUME. IT FEATURES PLenty OF BRIGHT FABRIC DECORATIONS, AND ITS EMBROIDERED WITH VIVID CRIMSON ROSES IN FULL BLOOM. WHEN ITS WEARER IS ACTIVE ON THE FRONT LINE OF A BATTLE, IT LOOKS AS IF THEY ARE DANCING.

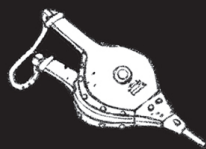


▶ ITEM 3:

[MOONLIGHT MAGIC STONE]

AN AMULET MADE OF FAINTLY SHINING MOONLIGHT STONE. USING IT RECOVERS YOUR MP SLIGHTLY, BUT IT HAS A LONG RECAST TIME. A FULL TWENTY-FOUR HOURS. IT CERTAINLY ISN'T A CONVENIENT ITEM, BUT ONE LOW-LEVEL RECOVERY SPELL CAN MEAN THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH FOR A COMPANION, SO THE TREASURED IT





<Bellows>
A tool for blowing air
into things. Used by
blacksmiths.

“Dweaaaah?! Whoa, hey, slow down, Fluffers!”

As she chased after Gumon the enormous wolf, Kanami lost her balance and swung her arms around as if she were swimming. Due to its canals, which were like the type in terraced fields, this huge, deep subterranean cavern was awash in enough water to get the soles of their shoes wet.

Without turning to look at her companions, Gumon casually scaled the terraces with the grace unique to creatures that traveled on four legs.

Apparently, this was a regular cavern.

According to what he’d heard from Hua Diao, there were several hundred small-scale limestone caves in this mountain, a few dozen of which could be traversed by humans. It wasn’t a large-scale dungeon; Krusty suspected that countless instance-type dungeons might have been fixed in place this way by the Catastrophe.

The floating Magic Light was something Kanami had summoned from a Lamplight Scroll. It was technically a noncombat spell for Magic Attack classes, but convenient, low-level spells were often provided as consumable magic items anyone could use. They didn’t cost much, so seasoned Adventurers invariably slipped them into their belongings.

Even though it was illuminated now, the damp cave still held darkness, but Kanami didn’t seem to care one bit. She was a Monk, her body encased in skimpy light armor, and she moved through the gloomy cave lightly. She peeked into the shadows and branch tunnels here and there like a restless child. Phrased diplomatically, she was confirming their route; considered normally, she was satisfying her curiosity.

Krusty watched her without comment.

It wasn’t as if there was any particular advantage or disadvantage for him, and if she cleared the way for him, that was just fine.

His thought on the situation was *It looks as though trouble just got*

started. In Krusty's life, this was a familiar premonition.

When he was small, he'd thought of himself as a small boat, floating on a stormy ocean.

To Haruaki Kounoike, the outside world was something unreasonable he couldn't fight.

When he was old enough to go to school, he'd learned the phrase *haran banjou*, "the vicissitudes of life." The *ran* in *haran* meant "big waves." *Banjou* meant being incredibly high, or very deep. The whole phrase meant big waves that came over and over, and—with what was in a way a very boyish, reckless obstinacy—it secured a special place for itself in his heart. When he bluffed inwardly, *Hey, this is perfect for a surfer*, the world of stormy waves became a problem he needed to ride.

By the time he entered middle school, he was able to dance skillfully on top of the great waves, and by high school, he even felt that most quarrels weren't stimulating enough.

Bohemian. Debauched.

That was what his relatives had begun to call him.

Of course, as far as he could tell, this wasn't a fact. He'd never burned through the family's assets with wasteful spending, and he didn't feel as if he'd shirked his duties and done just as he pleased.

On the contrary, he thought he'd always been considerate of his relatives. As the son of a mistress, he was someone who was easy to view coldly, and the Kounoikes were a distinguished family with relations all over Japan. There was nothing harder to deal with than a rich, prestigious family who lived in rural areas. Not only that, but when their main business was moneylending, the difficulty boggled the imagination. Haruaki Kounoike had been a clever young man, so he'd been more than willing to live without causing them trouble or getting in their way.

That said, that was with regard to himself, and the trouble was a different matter. Those vicissitudes of life—in other words, the various commotions that surged his way—were inevitable. He didn't cause them.

For that very reason, he loved them.

Well, I won't say I never actively got involved in any of them, though.

His duel with Elias had been that way. He wasn't crazy enough to take the first swing himself, but if someone started slashing at him, he'd cheerfully play along. He even thought that, since someone had taken a slash at him, he was missing out if he didn't make sure they entertained him.

To Krusty, the current ruckus was another of the world's performances. Of course, if he was going to put it that way, all the commotions that had followed the Catastrophe had been the same

way. He didn't intend to actively participate in them, but he did plan to savor every battle that came his way.

As Krusty thought these things, he saw Kanami scale a cliff up ahead.

Clinging to wet rocks wasn't really his thing, so he walked down the sloping tunnel that continued to the right. At that, with a flustered shout, Kanami came running after him, passed him, and began walking in front of him again.

"You like being in the lead, then?"

"Yeah!"

Why?

↑ That's a trite question.

→ Is it possible there's no reason for liking things?

↑ There could be one.

→ However, I'm not really interested enough to ask.

→ Has she always liked it?

→ That's probably the case.

→ She was the first to appear at the hunting grounds conference with D.D.D., too.

→ However, she fell asleep in the middle of the practical business talks (conjecture).

→ A woman who snores during a voice chat.

→ Responsibility as the leader of the Tea Party.

↑ Could it actually be the opposite?

"Were you the leader of the Tea Party because you like walking in front of everyone?"

The question popped into Krusty's mind, and the response he got was "Yep, you got it!" Considered in the ordinary way, that reason seemed impossible. Becoming the leader of a community for no other reason than the fact that you wanted to be in the lead walking spot... He'd never heard of such a thing in any guild.

However, the response made sense to him, too. She was lacking in common sense, so naturally, she wouldn't be sensible internally.

Kanami, who was humming as she walked ahead of him, turned around cheerfully, asking, "What are things like over there?" She'd probably gotten bored.

"What are they like?"

"Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. How've you been, these past two years?! And what's it like on the Yamato server?"

"Don't you already know?" Krusty responded in a low voice.

It wasn't that he wanted to keep it a secret or that he didn't want

to talk to her, but he was planning to avoid repeating things she'd heard before.

"Nah... That's not how it is. I didn't make contact, and I did other stuff, and I got stopped! I didn't hear much from KR, either. He wouldn't give me straight answers."

"Could you have brought that on yourself, perhaps?"

KR had been a Debauchery Tea Party member. He'd been one of the three counselors in that meteoric group (to which Krusty had felt a sense of affinity simply because of the sound of the word *debauchery*, for some reason.)

"You're cold, Krus-Krus. If you walk along silently in a place like this, your glasses will start glinting too much."

"..."

Krusty shrugged. He'd had no intention of ducking her questions; if she wanted him to talk, he wasn't against doing that. "Okay, so go on: report, report, rhubarb," Kanami was shouting. He probably should fill her in on the doings of the people of Akiba.

"The past two years, you said? As far as raid captures are concerned, D.D.D., Howling, and the Knights of the Black Sword competed. Honesty was up and down. Two new guilds, the West Wind Brigade and Silver Sword, improved and rapidly caught up to the top groups."

He began by relating news about a harmless topic that wasn't likely to cause offense: the raid rankings over the past couple of years.

The real-world rankings hadn't been prepared by the *Elder Tales* official site; raids weren't evaluated that way. Instead, the communities on each server provided them in the form of anonymous bulletin-board rumors and similar things.

When an expansion pack was released, it included several items of high-end content. The majority of these were full raid chain stories. In other words, extra content. In most cases, one expansion pack included between four and seven dungeons, and one dungeon had anywhere from three to ten raid bosses. In other words, one expansion pack had about thirty "targets."

There was a tacit order of precedence regarding these powerful enemies. In many cases, dungeons were set up so that you could capture them in any order you liked, but in practice, unless you defeated the raid enemies in lower-ranking dungeons and filled out your equipment, even if you went up against higher-ranking bosses, you weren't likely to win.

The raid rankings were an aggregate of information regarding which guild had defeated its way up to which objective in these expansion packs.

It took several weeks to defeat a single boss. They needed that

much time to analyze an enemy about which they had absolutely no information, get their equipment in order, and train as a team. In other words, every time an expansion pack went on sale, this rankings race—"D.D.D. has defeated the eighth boss." "It sounds like the Knights of the Black Sword are up to the seventh one now."—went on for twenty months. That was the *Elder Tales* raid rankings.

The rankings also gave a portrait of the power struggles on the server, and to simplistic watchers, they were the guild hierarchy as well.

"That sounds surprisingly stable."

"Expansion pack levels didn't vary much, either," Krusty answered.

On the Yamato server, D.D.D., Howling, and the Knights of the Black Sword were powerful raid guilds with substantial histories. They'd been competing with each other since the days when the Debauchery Tea Party was active. It was also true that the expansion packs that had been released had tended to simply add dungeons, rather than new elements that would upset the preexisting power balance.

The upshot was that, in the two years since the Debauchery Tea Party had disbanded, the cutthroat race had continued; however, the competition was still going strong, and there had been no unexpected twists.

"Uh-huh, uh-huh. Umm, what about since the Catastrophe?"

"That's...not possible to sum up in a word. Akiba established an organization known as the Round Table Council."

"Yeah, I heard a little about that."

"Shiroe is the central figure."

Krusty mentioned this because he'd begun to feel mischievous. Being complimented made Shiroe uncomfortable. He was an unbalanced, interesting friend. Krusty's impression of Shiroe was that he was a foolhardy idealist, a specialist in hand-to-hand fighting with an ultra-long-distance firing range.

To reach an objective, he'd extend his range as far as he had to. Even in situations where he only had to bag the prey right in front of him, he tried to pull in everything, all the way out to the distant horizon, in order to resolve the whole matter and carry through. And even so, he didn't snipe; he used a drawn katana for all of it. Conditions that would let him attack unilaterally were in place, and yet, the guy himself wanted to get hurt, too.

It struck him as a strange picture.

██████ had been like that, too.

At that conference, she'd surprised Krusty. It had been a small defeat. The victor had the right to claim the spoils of their victory.

Why would she offer up her own body and soul? Why would she try to get involved?

Isaac and Michitaka and all the guild masters who'd gathered for the Round Table Council were a little mysterious. A whimsical component that no one could call efficient had become the sort of nobility that could be termed "leeway" and was helping the organization operate... Although Krusty was probably not an exception there.

"Shiro, huh? Mm-fu-fu-fu-fu. I knew it. I figured Shiro would turn into a cool guy like that."

"Did you?"

"Yep, yep. Off-road, of course."

When he saw her expression—a smile that could only be called delighted—Krusty smiled wryly.

Apparently, this woman enjoyed what Shiroe was doing.

He didn't know which sense of *enjoyed* was accurate here, but now that he thought about it, this woman could be called the pinnacle of whimsy and waste.

It wasn't as if he hadn't spoken with Shiroe and this woman back in the days of the game, but apparently, his understanding had been shallow then. He hadn't thought they were people with this much depth.

"In Yamato, by and large, both Akiba and Minami are peaceful. Of course it's likely there are a variety of things under the surface, but that's true of anywhere people live. The town of Akiba has acquired the combined team of the Round Table Council; they've solved the issues of plunder and hostile acts and blocked the first wave of damage to the People of the Earth, and by now, I expect they're approaching the end of the regular raid events."

Well, he wasn't lying. The outstanding problems on the Yamato server had been taken care of, in a general sense.

That said, to Krusty, it actually looked as though the situation was growing more chaotic.

It was a problem that preceded both optimism and pessimism: This situation, which resembled the discovery of a new continent, couldn't possibly end peacefully.

The Round Table Council's trouble with training those who were midlevel and below, which it had withdrawn from partway through, probably wouldn't develop into much of an issue even if Krusty wasn't there. However, the time they'd bought from the Lords' Council under the cover of that program would naturally hit its time limit. With the threat of the goblins removed, the relationship between Adventurers and People of the Earth would inevitably progress toward the next stage. That in itself wasn't a bad thing, but steering their mutual

relationship after the hostile entity that had confronted them was gone would be extremely difficult. He would have liked the goblins to remain their enemy until a certain level of exchange had been established as common.

In the first place, Adventurers and People of the Earth were too far removed from each other. With a difference that great, you couldn't expect anything from compromises.

Shiroe, whose heart burned much hotter than his appearance suggested, had journeyed north to strike a balance, but there as well, he must have been counting on chances of victory that were practically a pipe dream. He didn't think he'd fail, but even if he succeeded, he'd never settle all the problems.

Or, no, if he succeeded, precisely because he'd done so, Ains would probably go off half-cocked.

When you looked at the big picture, the circumstances were beyond the scope of individual efforts.

Of course, it would probably be possible to block small, individual misfortunes. However, to put the situation in order, far more blood was bound to be spilled.

And it isn't as though my being there would have changed anything. Krusty shrugged in response to his own thoughts.

"Why are you all the way out here, Krus-Krus?"

"I got involved in an accident, I think. It's what saddled me with this bad status."

Krusty answered as smoothly as if he'd prepared for that question in advance.

He hadn't come here voluntarily, but he couldn't say he'd actively fought it, either.

He was merely a little quick-witted, and if he took a comprehensive standpoint, no matter where he was, he couldn't influence crowds. This was only natural, as he wasn't trying to influence them. As a result, whether he was flung off somewhere or stayed where he was, he didn't really care either way.

As long as he could find something relatively fun in any given situation, he was content.

"By whom?"

"Whom...?"

Kanami's question caught Krusty off guard.

Who had involved him? Who had cursed him?

Who had defeated him?

Carelessly, those questions hadn't even occurred to him.

As that train of thought flashed into his mind, Krusty looked down. Somewhere along the way, a pale golden light had begun to

illuminate him. A cold wind swirled, making his mantle flap.

The long, winding limestone cavern had led the two Adventurers to the mountainside of Mount Lang Jun.

► 2

Covered in dust and thoroughly dirty, Hua Diao was in the greatest distress of her life. In the moment of the collapse, Krusty had flipped her away, sending her flying, and so she'd escaped unharmed, but she'd gotten stuck on a pine branch and had spent a short while unconscious. When she woke up, the topography of Mount Lang Jun had changed drastically, and it had taken her easily half a day to crawl up the rocky mountainside.

Pathetically, she was leaking big tears, and her nose was terribly snuffly.

Her plain yet dignified heavenly retainer's clothes were worn through and ragged. For that matter, Hua Diao herself was ragged as well.

"What an awful thing to happen."

Despondent, she came to a stop, but then she gritted her teeth and got over another boulder.

She was short, and to her, the sort of level difference Krusty could cross in a single stride was a cliff.

"I wonder if Master Immortal is all right. And all our companions, too..."

The martenfolk were heavenly officials who administered fairyland. That wasn't a lie. In which case, what was a heavenly official? Frankly, Hua Diao didn't know the answer.

What, on the other hand, was a government official? Hua Diao didn't know the exact meaning of that term or job, either.

She was conscious that it was a respected civil service position. She had self-esteem that told her it must be something important. However, if asked *why* it was important, the only answer she could give was a vague *Because you're a heavenly official, maybe?* She understood so little about the specific duties that, if asked what they were, she would have averted her eyes.

According to her hazy memories of the term *civil servant*, you had a boss who gave you orders and duties to carry out, but Hua Diao had no direct boss. She'd never met one, not in all the time since she was born, and she hadn't taken any orders.

If she'd had to say, all the Ancients and Immortals should have

counted as her boss, but until the Enchantress Youren had visited, no Immortals had come to the fairyland where Hua Diao lived.

In addition, Hua Diao didn't really know what heaven was, either.

She knew it was somewhere up above them, and that the Immortals lived there, but she'd never been, not once.

From the time they were born, Hua Diao and the other martenfolk had been in the enchanted land on Mount Lang Jun, and they'd lived as its caretakers. Well, they might have been more like freeloaders than government officials...

After a certain point in time, fairyland had grown large, the number of rooms in the shrine had increased, and her sisters had increased in number as well before she was aware of it, but Hua Diao and the others had lived modestly. They swept the shrine, sprinkled water on the long, perilous stone staircase, and greeted Zhu Huan and the other worshippers who stopped by on occasion. Most of their meals consisted of hard tree nuts. The peaches belonged to the Immortals, and it was a grave crime for a government official to help herself to one.

For that reason, when Krusty had appeared, she'd been really happy.

She'd heard he was there to convalesce from an illness, so she'd nursed him with everything she'd had, but it didn't seem to have been all that serious. In the end, he'd spent his time speaking to Hua Diao and the others about all sorts of things.

She didn't understand his personality very well, and he had a spiteful streak, but he was intelligent and elegant, and she thought he was a kind boss.

As Hua Diao and her sisters gazed up at the peaches that swayed in the soft breezes of fairyland, he'd picked large fruits without so much as hesitating and given them to them. He'd teased them as he'd done it—"When your limbs are short, you can't really climb trees, can you?"—but that was misdirection, and just so like him, Hua Diao thought. After all, the martenfolk were all accomplished tree climbers.

The peaches had been meltingly sweet, but the dishes Master Immortal made were even more splendid. He wouldn't always make them, but they were far, far more flavorful than the things the martenfolk made. The martenfolk should have been able to get by without eating, but they'd even take human shape or turn into spirits in order to line up for the food Master Immortal made.

Wasn't his "stewed cubed-pork and boiled egg set meal" far more delicious than the court cuisine said to be served in the heavenly palace, which they knew of in theory? This was a secret, but as the leader, and therefore the one who was treated to it every time, Hua

Diao would roll right over for it.

As a result, right now, Hua Diao's nose was bright red from crying.

Krusty had been swallowed up by that pitch-black hole, and just the thought that he might have been smashed flat by a huge boulder made her chest feel as if it were being crushed.

She wanted him to serve her that peach tarte tatin he made—sweet and mellow, with a hint of bitterness, as if it had been slightly scorched—one more time. She wanted him to display the brilliant skill with which he cut it into twelve equal pieces, smiling meanly as he did so.

Wiping her nose, Hua Diao looked up abruptly, then froze. Glittering rainbow light was climbing into the blue of the early-morning sky. The light was really pretty, but it seemed very sad somehow, and her heart ached.

It was the first time Hua Diao had ever seen that light.

Mount Lang Jun was the enormous rocky mountain whose peak housed the Bai Tao Shrine. However, in this new situation, it had become clear that the mountain's interior was a veritable anthill of countless limestone caverns.

The bedrock was more than hard enough, and the caves had probably been created through erosion over tens of thousands of years. However, at this point, those limestone caverns were caving in everywhere, and either passage was impossible, or new connecting routes had appeared. Even as Hua Diao crawled across the mountain's surface like this, here and there the scenery was different from what she remembered.

She descended the rubble-littered slope of a mortar-shaped depression where the rock—which ordinarily had a small path running across it—had collapsed. The footing was too unstable for her to walk upright, and sometimes she crawled down, facing backward. Even then, the rocks collapsed with a clatter, making her uneasy.

The scenery that spread before Hua Diao was a familiar underground cavern, but as she went down several differences in level, it changed. The natural rock, as black as if it was wet, became a floor with straight, geometric lines in a bright gray. The corridor Hua Diao was traveling down was shaped like a tube that would have been an octagon if you cut it into slices.

It was grimy and covered in dust, but it seemed as if it had probably been clean once. This was clear from the way the corridor stretched on and on, with no distortions in its angle or size. Fissures ran through the corridor in places, and through them, she could see

metal pipes and structures with strange, threadlike things buried in them. This place might be an underground fortress or a ruin.

As was usual for fairylands, Mount Lang Jun had a mission to guard Mount Kunlun, and Hua Diao wondered if this was what that facility was for. That said, she had no knowledge of or interest in it, so she only thought, *That could be it.*

She sniffed the air, but she couldn't find Master Immortal's scent. Possibly because of that large-scale collapse, all she picked up was murky water, dust, and a smell like sparks. After she crossed a metal plate with TELEVISION STATION written on it, the corridor grew wider, and she emerged in an area where metal rails, those thread things from earlier, and a variety of metal magic items she'd never seen before had been discarded.

"Was this corridor the wrong way?"

When Hua Diao had gone far enough that she muttered those words, the corridor was abruptly ruptured by an enormous natural rock. She poked her head through a gap, looked around at the darkness, then crept into the big hall that lay beyond. As she did so, the scorched smell from earlier grew stronger.

"What could it be...?"

Hua Diao felt, dimly, that there might be danger here, and she murmured those words precisely because she was frightened. She looked around actively, but it was only because she was afraid of the darkness, not because she was on her guard.

"There's nothing here, is there? I mean, it's so far underground—"

Hua Diao was speaking quickly, trying to distract herself so that she wouldn't cringe back, when she discovered sunlight. It shone in, slashing through the darkness, as white as if it had been bleached.

It was afternoon, and already the light wasn't radiant enough to be vivid.

However, even so, it was sunlight. When she looked up, she saw that part of the high ceiling had collapsed, leaving a hole. From the fact that she could see blue sky far in the distance, it looked as though it would be possible to get out through there... Provided you could fly, of course.

Her eyes had been dazzled by the light, which made the shadows look even darker.

As a result, it was no wonder Hua Diao was a little late in noticing it.

Crouched on the other side of the veil of light, which streamed in like a waterfall, was an enormous beast. It was a leonine monster, with fur so smooth it looked wet. Its entire body was covered with a tough-looking pelt, and although that pelt was different colors, its face was covered in grotesque red flesh, as if the fur in that area had been

plucked.

“Heegh!”

She’d covered her mouth hastily, so her scream came out sounding awkward, like a hiccup. However, naturally, Hua Diao didn’t have the leeway to regret that. She didn’t think, *I’ll be careful not to let it notice me* or *I’ll turn back without making a sound*. Not even the tiniest bit.

Because she and the enormous beast were already looking each other in the eyes.

The beast had clearly noticed Hua Diao, and it was gazing at her as if licking her from head to toe with its eyes. The strength went out of Hua Diao’s legs, leaving them soft and uncertain, so that she didn’t even know whether she was standing up or lying down.

I’ll die. I’m going to die.

In the hall, with its shafts of light, the beast shambled forward. It looked even bigger.

It wasn’t an animal. It was a magical beast.

Not only that, it was a type she’d never seen on Mount Lang Jun, an evil beast that scattered miasma around.

When she smelled its breath, which had a wild stink to it, Hua Diao realized something.

That scorched smell hadn’t been because something was burning. The pale electricity that cloaked the beast’s four limbs and breath was burning the air itself.

There was a series of sharp snaps, as if the air had split. The difference in voltage made her skin prickle and tingle, and Hua Diao squeezed her eyes shut. She was finished. She was going to die here. She didn’t know the reason, but this magic beast, which had come from the outside, was definitely going to eat her.

Unlike Master Immortal, this creepy monster probably wouldn’t even give her a side of peach sauce. Hua Diao had given up all hope, and a raging torrent of electricity leapt at her.

She’d been flung into the air, and the floating sensation made her giddy. Then she realized she was clinging to solid shoulder armor made of blue steel.

“Fancy meeting you here.”

Krusty smiled, the corners of his lips curving slightly, and Hua Diao’s eyes widened until they were perfect circles. “Master Immortal!” she shouted, but even as she did so, Krusty was lightly evading, dodging left and right. Somewhere in there, the magical beast had gotten right up close to them, and he shoved his double-bladed bardiche into its gaping jaws, stopping them.

“It’s a Nue.”

“That’s a Nue, all right! Wow, that takes me back.”

Krusty’s frame was massive, but a female martial artist leapt lightly over his head, aiming for the beast, and slammed a fist into it with a metallic roar.

“At this size, it’s probably a half-raid-rank. It’s likely to be the same type as the one in the Sky Tower, or a similar strain. It’s weak against physical blows and has a tolerance for electricity.”

“This really is a big ol’ ruckus, isn’t it?! That’s Eured for you! Continent of adventure!

With that cheerful response from the new girl, a ferocious battle began.

► 3

A fierce exchange played out between Krusty’s group and the Nue, a beast that controlled electricity.

At first, Krusty held Hua Diao, but when she spotted her chance, she got down and fled into the shadow of the rocks. She hadn’t abandoned the Immortal; she’d done it so that she wouldn’t get in his way as he fought.

Master Immortal never let the pain show in his expression, but there was a wound in his side that never stopped bleeding.

No matter how often they changed his bandages, the red seeped through. He said the wound was probably cursed. Master Immortal had smiled coldly, and come to think of it, his face had always looked pale and transparent. Hua Diao was afraid to be a burden to him.

Of course, if Krusty was defeated, she was prepared to lose her own life as well.

After all, there was really no way for her to oppose that monster with her own combat strength. With her short limbs, she didn’t even think she’d be able to run away.

She’d always thought he was strong, but the Immortal’s fight was overwhelming.

Every swing of his thick ax whipped up a tsunami of rubble, dirt, and sand that assailed the beast with the force of an angry roar. However, the Nue, a magical beast that was the color of darkness, was powerful, and even Krusty’s ferocious attacks didn’t seem to be doing much damage to it.

The black-haired woman who’d appeared along with the Immortal launched fearsome attacks as well. While Krusty seemed to sink his

roots solidly into the earth, swinging both arms around, attacking and defending with a mass of iron, her movements had a feline agility about them. She flew in, paid out several jabs or unleashed kicks, then drew an arc in midair. The way she moved was a little too rough to call a dance, but it was very beautiful.

One more supporting member had joined the fight.

It was Gumon, the wolf dog who'd always waited at Krusty's feet.

Certainly, the wolf had a splendid physique, and Hua Diao had thought that it would be terrible to get chewed on by her, but now that she saw her fighting this way, her strength was overwhelming. Her large frame didn't even compare unfavorably to Krusty's, and she slammed it against the enemy, moving as if she was creeping across the ground in that way unique to quadrupeds. She looked brutal, and even so, she was elegant, too. The fur on her back—a back Hua Diao had ridden on occasion—reflected the light, shining wetly; it looked like flowing mercury.

"It went *bwoonng*! It seriously did! *Bwoonng*!"

"Did it really, Miss Kanami? That's a good noise."

Her punch seemed to have brought some kickback with it; the woman was shaking her hand and looking upset.

"You're kinda casually mean, aren't you, Krus-Krus?! Are you discriminating against me because I'm me?"

"You're wearing gauntlets, so you should be fine."

"You just tacked that on like you thought it was a pain!"

To her, it looked as though the two of them and the wolf dog were working together perfectly. Apparently, the woman was an old acquaintance, and from what the Immortal said, her name seemed to be Kanami. Unlike him, she wore an extremely thin ethnic costume, and she danced up to the magical beast like a whirlwind, then attacked.

Could she be another Immortal? Hua Diao wondered. She felt an odd emotion, something between loss and disappointment. Since she was fighting alongside Krusty, there was a good possibility the woman was another Ancient. One of the few comrades who'd survived in this broken world.

If she was, she would be someone Hua Diao was meant to serve, like Krusty. That struck her as a bit unfortunate. Although, if the woman was like Master Immortal, she might be good at making sweets—

The thought made Hua Diao wonder if she was really that much of a glutton, and her cheeks flushed.

"Tiger Echo Fist!!"

Contrary to the sound of the attack's name, Kanami unleashed a

contact attack that was almost like a shoulder-centered body blow. As if it had taken damage from it, the beast—which must have weighed several hundred kilos—rose into the air for a moment and was knocked away, staggering.

Gumon the wolf dog was waiting for it. Crouching low, she aimed for its vulnerable back legs, sinking her sharp fangs into its iron pelt. The Nue lost its balance entirely, and she dragged it another half step to inflict more pain, then adjusted her angle, correcting her attitude.

Then, scattering the crimson light of mana around, Krusty attacked its defenseless neck. The bardiche, whose blade was more than fifty centimeters wide, fell like the blade of a guillotine. At that attack, even the beast set up a groaning wail.

Master Immortal is so strong!

Hua Diao did a little dance.

However, she couldn't state categorically that the fight would be a sweeping victory for them.

True, from what she was seeing, it seemed to be trending in their favor. However, the Nue was no common beast. There was no telling where it had been hiding it, but with a flood of energy, it turned the tables in a rush, and several spheres of electricity surfaced, releasing a scorched stench into their surroundings.

The two Adventurers shifted to evading, and no sooner had their attacks begun to have trouble connecting than its thick front paws, which had claws like forked spears, switched from jabbing to sweeping. The female martial artist was forced to dodge dramatically to avoid its sharp hooked claws.

And more than anything, its neck—which had taken that unequaled attack from Master Immortal—was a problem.

If it had taken an attack like that, even a big boulder would probably have been pulverized. There was no need to even think about what would have happened if Hua Diao had been its target (even if there had been a hundred of her, they would all have been laid out), but on the neck that had actually been the target, the fur around the wound was very lightly bloodied, and that was all.

Hua Diao had no idea what sort of abilities this monster had, but even so, it was clear that one of its weapons was its absurd physical strength. And if that was the case, wouldn't the Immortals' group run through their strength soon and collapse? There were only three of them. The unease made Hua Diao quake.

As it turned out, her guess wasn't that far off the mark.

To Hua Diao, the two Adventurers had looked as if they were fighting their battle with composure, but they didn't actually have as much leeway as it seemed.

After all, their opponent was a half-raid-rank monster.

That meant that, properly speaking, twelve Adventurers with appropriate levels would have gathered and fought it together. The beast's level was 84. The two of them had levels around 90, so it was slightly below their rank.

Adventurers who had the help of phantasms could fight monsters that were on their level, or a maximum of seven levels higher. For that reason, if Krusty's subjugation team had been a regular group with twelve members, a level of 84 should have been fairly easy. It was precisely because of this level difference that Krusty's group had been able to evade the monster's attacks, parry them, and hold out this long.

However, on the other hand, the fact that they only had a quarter of that regular number was critical.

No matter how many combatants there were, defensive and evasive strengths didn't change very much. However, attack power and endurance varied greatly depending on the number of people. Attacks were proportionate to the number of strikes, and endurance—in other words, MP—was proportionate to the number of team members. The result would be a future where Krusty and the others ran out of strength before they could finish off the Nue. Even if they kept successfully avoiding lethal attacks, fatigue and drained MP would cut down on the ways they could respond, and they'd be crushed like grains of wheat in a mortar.

"I think I just remembered something, sort of!"

"You're late."

"Sorry for living on vague memories."

Even so, Kanami smiled merrily as she fought, and while Krusty grumbled, he left no openings. It wasn't possible to sense that sort of despair from either of them. Hua Diao only watched them, fretting.

"I guess all countries reuse raid bosses, huh?"

"—I wonder about that. According to Hua Diao, this was a wolf-type dungeon set."

"So it's not the boss for this place?"

"I really couldn't say. Well, it wouldn't be odd."

Their laidback conversation was interrupted by a wide-range attack from the beast.

The range of the flood of electricity had a radius of several dozen meters. The female Monk, operating on unfathomable logic, dodged that aggressive torrent, parrying it. It was Phantom Step, one of the Monk class's abilities, but Hua Diao didn't know that.

Krusty—who had shrewdly slipped into the opening Kanami had created by disrupting the current, then negated the damage—whipped

up dirt and sand with his bardiche, creating an impromptu defensive mound of soil. Gumon the wolf dog made use of it.

Hua Diao wasn't able to join their conversation, but she wanted to tell them, *No, no, this is wrong; I don't know anything about a monster like this*. From what Hua Diao knew, Mount Lang Jun was connected to Mount Kunlun, a sacred place; it was a fairyland that existed to spread distant voices. It was said to be protected by an enormous wolf (just like Gumon) called Lang Jun, the wolf lord, not by this hideous monster with its raw red face.

"I don't know anything about this one."

When she shouted the words, Krusty, who'd heard, responded without turning around, raising his ax over his head as he did so: "Is that right?" She never could tell what Master Immortal was thinking, but he'd accepted that remark very easily.

"Then where do you suppose it came from?"

"There's no way I could know— Eeeeeeeep?!"

The irritated Nue brought its front leg down hard, and rubble flew, scattering.

The attacks were trivial, probably no more than the Nue venting its annoyance, and they couldn't even scratch Krusty's blue steel armor. However, this wasn't true for Hua Diao, who'd leaned out from the shadow of the boulders to protest. A rock the size of her head came flying toward her at high speed.

When she jumped back, startled, her excess momentum sent her rolling over and over.

The topography was probably to blame, too: The soil that had fallen from the shadows of the rocks where she'd been hiding had piled up, forming a slope, and there was nothing to stop her. In a dizzying series of motions, Hua Diao rolled a good five meters out.

To the martenfolk, that was quite a distance.

She would have liked to sprint back into the cover of the rocks, but she was so frightened that she couldn't even stand, and all she could do was crawl on all fours, panicking. Her fingertips found the edge of some silken fabric, but her knees were quaking too badly to let her cling to it and get to her feet.

"It came from the sky."

A clear voice spoke to the dizzy otter. When she looked up, she saw that the hem she was clinging to belonged to a woman's robe. She couldn't see her face, but the voice and the murky sweet fragrance told her who it was that had spoken.

"An overview of the summoning technique was sent to Mount Kunlun. This made it possible to send military forces to each area, corresponding to the resources."

The voice belonged to Enchantress Youren.

A faint smile hovered at the edges of her lips. With the tenderness of a mother watching children at play, the Enchantress continued to speak words Hua Diao didn't understand.

"Our witch-ruler on Mount Kunlun, the Queen Mother of the West, is hastening the hands of the clock. She says this land holds no one who is qualified."

What was the Enchantress saying?

Hua Diao, the heavenly official, didn't know, either.

Even though she'd been someone kind who had visited to nurse Master Immortal, too...

No, even now, her face looked kind and fulfilled, and yet, for some reason, Hua Diao couldn't think of it that way. The little smile on her soft lips looked like a roar of laughter that split her face all the way to her ears. It couldn't really be like that, but she couldn't stop shivering.

"Our sovereign, who drifts in slumber on the shore of shattered rainbows, dreams of returning home. She says to send the time-release beasts, released one after another by Coropatiron, down like shooting stars."

Her lilting words froze in the face of an abrupt, overwhelming chill.

"Elias, my new comrade. Obey the request of the Queen Mother of the West and put an end to your obsession."

She swept her arm outward, and as if guided by the gesture, a blue-and-gold knight appeared. Transparent sword dangling loosely, he stepped onto the battlefield.

► 4

The battle became a melee.

Calling it a three-on-three fight would have been an accurate description of the circumstances.

The defenders consisted of the Monk Kanami, the wolf dog Gumon, and the Guardian Krusty.

The attackers were, first and foremost, the Nue, a magical beast that wielded lightning, followed by the ultra-high level Blademancer Elias Hackblade, and the enigmatic Ancient Enchantress Youren.

If you thought of it as a contest of strength, they were at a ridiculous disadvantage... Meaning Krusty's side, of course.

The Nue, a magical beast, was a half-raid-rank monster. Elias was a level-100 Ancient. Then there was Enchantress Youren as well. Ordinarily, they would have needed a unit of twenty or so people to

fight them.

However, Krusty wasn't anxious or afraid. Pushed into action by the tingling heat of the battle and, more than that, by his curiosity, he swung his bardiche. The fun was about to begin.

Armed combat was an intriguing thing.

He didn't know whether the situation was peculiar to this world, which had its roots in the *Elder Tales* game, or whether it was like that in general, but there were a variety of subtleties in it.

When Krusty had fought Elias, the trend of that one-on-one battle had been dictated by the individuals' combat abilities and mental strategies. The self-possession to curb mental confusion and the perceptiveness to spot vulnerabilities were particularly important. Krusty, whose true strength had been inferior, had managed to get through that battle without losing his life because, at the time, he'd been superior to Elias mentally.

He'd been helped along by his Hyperion Eye. This Mystery, which widened his field of vision, showed its true value when its user's mind was serene.

Meanwhile, what was important in group combat was the division of roles, communication, and the physical manifestation of those things—teamwork. It wasn't that individuals' combat abilities and coolheadedness weren't necessary, but they were no longer the most important thing, and your ordinary training and how you dealt with others acquired more meaning. In battles of that size, the most important things were having flexible tactics that responded to the state of combat, and whether you were able to communicate well enough that you could fight as one entity.

In contrast, the three-on-three battle that was currently under way was terribly primitive, dizzying, and treacherous.

“Gwarrgh!”

The Nue, which had been belted behind the ear with a high-speed kick from adamantine toes, accidentally spit a sphere of compressed electricity at Elias. Kanami had set that up on purpose. Bloodshot eyes swamped with resentment, Elias deflected the sphere of electricity with his crystal sword, but *the affinity was bad*. The purple lightning wrapped around the stream of water, enveloping Elias. Possibly because he was wearing high-resistance magic armor, he didn't take much damage, but for a moment, his movements were dulled.

Gumon charged into that vulnerability like a bullet, bounded up from below, and slammed her whole body into him.

With a sound like a car crash, Elias went flying.

“Wh-wh-wh-what'll I do?! I accidentally hit Eli-Eli!”

“Didn't you do that on purpose?”

Kanami was upset, but Krusty responded without even looking at her.

Three-on-three battles were disorienting. It was like a game of pinball.

In a one-on-one battle, you only had to think about your opponent, but when it was three-on-three, each of you had two companions. *Team plays tended to happen.* However, that sort of teamwork hadn't been calculated and trained for like a raid. There was a strong element of improvisation to it, as if it was the product of on-the-spot flashes of inspiration.

In a battle between small teams, the most necessary element was a feel for combat.

Its difficulty rivaled or surpassed that of raids, whose precision was improved by training.

Apparently, Kanami had a natural talent for that sort of combat. For the past little while, the Nue had seemed to be having trouble fighting. By continuing to evade its attacks, Kanami had been building up aggro, and at the same time, she continuously took up positions where the enemy couldn't avoid involving its allies in its large-scale attacks, locking down the middle range. The act seemed as if it would have required a long combat record, but apparently, she was doing it all on instinct.



“Eli-Eli’s turned into Dark Eli-Eli.”

“...”

“A minute ago he told me, ‘If you don’t get out of my way, I’ll cut you’ and took a slash at me, you know?!”

“...”

That said, since it was on instinct, what she was saying was pathetic. He didn’t even feel like smiling and nodding to help move the conversation along.

He shrugged, then took the opportunity to attack the Nue.

Enchantress Youren seemed to be plotting some sort of support action, but the Nue’s body was as big as a minivan. If he used it as an obstacle to block her line of sight, she wouldn’t be able to attack easily. Using the rotation of his knees, he struck it with close-range skills like Taunting Blow and Armor Crush, neatly crushing the origin points of the monster’s attacks without showing it any vulnerabilities.

Elias and Kanami were still fighting as if they were dancing, neither managing to land any telling blows on the other.

Kanami’s haphazard explanation had made it hard to understand, but apparently, the two of them were companions who had met on the way here. In that case, leaving him to her was probably the right thing to do.

He’d experienced Elias’s sword technique for himself, but it wasn’t as much fun this time around. Sure enough, easy lunacy didn’t add to your combat power.

That said, it probably wasn’t anything to be disappointed about. This buffet still had more dishes left on it than he could eat his way through. With that level-headed thought, Krusty set his sights on the ringleader, on the other side of the Nue.

Like the Nue, Enchantress Youren, who was keeping her cards hidden and not making any attacks of her own, had the air of a seasoned veteran about her.

Or is she afraid?

That was the impression he got when, in response to his gaze, the Enchantress turned sideways, wary of firing lines. It was the gesture of a child who had touched a stove and learned what burns were.

Krusty’s thoughts ran through an examination several hundred lines long.

He was considering the things Enchantress Youren had said.

The magical beast was sent from the sky.

It’s now possible to send military forces to each area.

This is because they shared the summoning technique technology and pulled together the resources.

The orders come from the Queen Mother of the West.

It was nothing important.

When he put everything in order, it was simply the sort of self-conscious reveal that movie villains tended to indulge in: the declaration that they were the ones who had orchestrated this affair.

In other words, they were the enemy.

She'd declared an invasion.

Krusty grinned.

He swung his bardiche, feeling so cheerful he didn't even care that his remaining HP was now below 20 percent. The bracing invigoration curved the corners of his lips up, and he wasn't able to keep from showing his clenched teeth.

Splendid.

He hadn't been interested in the woman who'd attempted to curry favor with a condescending air of having "saved" him, but if it was all right to take her down, it was a completely different matter. If he could exterminate her, then he had no reason to refuse. If she was declaring them to be enemies, what a terrific birthday present that was.

Deep inside Krusty, a mysterious vibration let him know:

This Enchantress Youren was also his "real" enemy.

She wasn't the sort of enemy Elias had been, when Krusty had faced off against him. She wasn't an "opponent"; she was an enemy in the sense of being a usurper. A resonance in his soul, like the wind blowing through the caverns of his stolen memories, made him sure of it.

The Enchantress and her companions had robbed Krusty of his memories, his personal property.

His smile widened.

What she had done was an unmistakable declaration of hostility, an act, and an overture, of a fight for their existence.

So Krusty would take everything from this Enchantress, too.

In a corner of his vision, Elias, who was radiating a clouded aura, was launching brute-force attacks at Kanami. The Monk looked perplexed, and she was evading them easily, but the attacks that didn't hit her seemed to be wounding her opponent deeply. With an inarticulate, animalistic roar, he shifted into a ruthless attack.

Kanami managed to get through the hurricane of a serial attack by crouching down, or flipping, or making them slip past with her gauntlets. True, Elias was the one who was pressing his opponent hard, but his attacks didn't have their earlier edge. His muddled mind was clouding his technique.

Why is he fighting Kanami, one of his companions?

→ Brainwashed or hypnotized, mental manipulation.
→ ...By Enchantress Youren. There's no need to even ask.

Having succinctly come to a conclusion, Krusty's interest waned.

It wasn't that he was repulsed by mental manipulation; people were beings that were influenced at every turn. Brainwashing was a type of education that knew where the limits were and emphasized utility; even living an active life was a kind of brainwashing mantra, the result of self-suggestion.

Since that was the case, although Enchantress Youren had done it and Elias had been tricked by it, he had no intention of accusing her for it, or blaming him for being weak. It was a very common sight, and it had merely happened on a battlefield this time, that was all.

However, on the other hand, he did feel something like irritation and scorn.

Loading those feelings onto his blade and releasing them, Krusty knocked the Nue flying and simultaneously attacked Enchantress Youren.

"So you're the one who made Elias weak."

Beneath the veil, her eyes widened, and as they exchanged looks, Krusty was sure of it: Getting weaker was a clear evil.

Even if brainwashing and mental manipulation weren't evil on their own, if they caused degradation, he could conclude that they were. That was Krusty for you.

The aversion he felt for the Enchantress changed to delight. After all, he was about to engage in mortal combat with this being who had engineered that clear evil.

Several wet sounds echoed, as if someone were hacking away at a soggy futon.

Apparently, Enchantress Youren really did have advanced combat abilities. A wall of mud appeared from the ground, blocking Krusty's attack. It seemed to have properties that diverted the force of lightning attacks away, into the ground, and it served as an impregnable defense against the Nue's attacks as well.

Sensing this, the Nue switched to long-charging electrical breath attacks that affected a wide range, although their force decreased. Since the force of each attack was down, they wouldn't prove lethal immediately, but practically speaking, they were impossible to avoid. The thunder beast was launching attacks that pulled in Enchantress Youren, who was making use of that mud wall. To Krusty, who had lost the ability to recover HP, it was a troublesome attack.

“Even if he is weakened, the great hero is attempting to harvest your lives.”

Krusty slammed a gauntlet into the lady’s mocking voice like a blunt instrument, interrupting it.

“I learned from **defeat**: to hunt, not gather. **True**, you may not be rank three but you are strong. You will die by your own swords.”

Was that why she’d sent Elias at them, then?

The more irritated he got, the wider his smile grew.

This woman probably didn’t understand a thing.

In the end, Krusty thought, life existed so that you could make attempts.

What could you do? What couldn’t you do? It was an experiment. Life existed to be used in those experiments.

The world held a massive amount of problems. Could they be resolved, or not? People ran through it to learn the answer. They burned through their brief lives, searching for answers they hadn’t yet seen.

Of course, malicious experiments that shouldn’t be performed probably existed as well. However, tackling challenges was the essence of humanity. No one could deny that. Taking a bird who was trying to fly and shutting it up in a cage was usurpation.

Going insane was also fine. However, as a result, Elias was no longer able to do things he’d been capable of. He’d lost the techniques he’d gained through a long period of devoted training. As he was now, he seemed desolate and pitiful.

Krusty’s annoyance gave strength to the Fresh Blood Demon Ax he swung.

“You and the rest will perish here.”

“We won’t know until we try.” Glaring at her with glittering eyes, Krusty whispered hoarsely.

The meaning of human life lay in testing to see whether things were possible.

Life was a tool for that purpose.

To Krusty, that was the greatest possible joy.

In the cage of his childhood, where he’d been forbidden even to test himself, it was all he’d dreamed of.

Krusty absolutely loved pulling off something difficult in front of people who blustered that it “couldn’t be done,” then seeing their arrogant, condescending expressions twist with humiliation.

Right now, the world had entrusted the question of whether the test was possible or impossible to Krusty.

The Berserker began to burn through what little life he had left.

Battles had abruptly begun breaking out all along the mountain ridge. There was no telling where they'd sprung from, but monsters like Eternal Moths and Moon Rabbits appeared from rainbow light and began to invade. Most of their opponents were monsters; it had turned into a fight between them and the Wise Wolves that made their home on Mount Lang Jun.

At the foot of the mountain, a group of Adventurers was also clashing with monsters cloaked in rainbow light. If Chun Lu had been there, they might have known that it was the guard guild she belonged to, the Lelang Wolf Cavalry, but Leonardo had only looked down from the pass, and he hadn't been able to make out that much.

All he knew was that the mountain range had abruptly gotten noisy and dangerous.

Ironically, the uproar showed Leonardo and Coppélia which road they should take. After all, the center, where the commotion was greatest, probably held some sort of clue about this incident, and it was likely that Kanami was there as well.

Coppélia and Leonardo advanced across the mountain's surface, following the uproar.

Leonardo had managed to keep from saying, *Kanami's screwed up again. Let's hurry up and get over there*, which he felt showed that he'd developed some self-control. That said, it was doubtful whether he'd needed to be that considerate with Coppélia: She'd responded to the remark he actually uttered with "Coppélia agrees that Master's chances of survival are good."

At any rate, the two of them headed farther and farther up the rocky mountain, where landslides had broken out here and there, avoiding battle as they went and driving back enemies when they absolutely had to.

They found the open space because fireworks just like the ones on the East River were going up from it. These fireworks, which were a familiar sight for locals, were a regular Independence Day feature hosted by Macy's (which Leonardo had never frequented due to his desire for candy bars). Although, to Leonardo—who thought proper engineers went up to the roof of the office (of course they wouldn't be working!) to drink beer and barbecue as they watched the parade stream by without a break—Independence Day was no more than this regular event.

Well, what had actually gone up had been spheres of electricity, not fireworks, and the flashy racket hadn't come from a parade of high

school cheerleaders, but from Kanami.

Guided by the sound of combat, Leonardo and Coppélia jumped down into the open space through the hole left by the collapse, then froze as they saw how bad the situation really was.

Leonardo had just been thinking about idle summer afternoons on Independence Day, and the shock was twice as great for him as it would have been for a normal person, but he admitted he'd brought it on himself and gave up. It was fine to shoot off a series of large-scale annihilation attacks in lieu of fireworks, right? You could probably say they were filling in for celebratory cannon salutes and laugh it off. Fighting an enormous magical beast instead of having a parade was pretty much like a NY Mets game. Leonardo was a fan of the team, and when he could get a ticket, he'd often spent Independence Day at the ballpark.

When you were traveling with Kanami, he thought noise on this level was one of those things that could happen. It was a nasty thing to think, but, well, it could probably happen.

However, even so, this was supposed to be a raid-class monster? What was up with that? Kanami and a wolf monster were fighting it alone.

Apparently, she was getting her hooks into animal familiars now, too. On top of that, Kanami and Elias were lashing out at each other with swords and fists, and he didn't know what it meant. He felt like he was in a dream.

"What the hell are you doing?!"

"Ah! Croakanardo! Perfect timing, are you okay?"

"We're fine. I dunno what 'perfect timing' is supposed to mean. Explain all this. Go ahead and pass out documents if you want."

"I'm busy right now."

"Yeah, I can see that, but Elias is—"

They weren't allowed to have a leisurely question-and-answer session. Elias, whose eyes were cloudy, had charged, holding his great sword like a spear. Kanami and Leonardo split up to avoid him, dodging left and right. Elias ran between them, crashing into the wall of the limestone cave, sending up a cloud of mist and scattering rubble around.

Of course, this didn't render him unable to fight. He appeared from the standing mist of scattered water droplets, stoop-shouldered and dragging his crystal sword so that it scraped along the stone.

"What's going on?!"

"I don't know, either. It was probably some kind of wacky evil beam—"

Are you a kid?!

But he didn't manage to make the retort.

Elias had leapt in as suddenly as if he were spring-loaded and had slammed countless daggerlike lumps of ice into Leonardo.

The Ancient probably thought he wouldn't be able to completely capture his opponent, an Assassin who fought with twin katanas, by swinging around his enormous two-handed sword. He'd chosen the right attack. Leonardo wasn't about to let himself get taken out for free, though. He shoved his two fire-attribute katanas, the fantasy-class Ninja Twin Flames, into the ice storm, attempting to cancel it out with the force of the flames and hot air.

"Your pulse and coloring are abnormal, Lord Elias. Do you wish to be heal—?"

However, even in that moment, Coppélia was Coppélia.

Tilting her head in an attentive gesture, she approached Elias fearlessly. The elf probably had some sort of status abnormality, and she was attempting to heal it.

Stepping out of the field Leonardo's weapons created, Coppélia took a direct hit from the shockwave the two combatants' clash had generated. Hastily, Leonardo swung his weapons sideways, but they didn't reach far enough to protect the slight girl.

That said, although Coppélia appeared to be wearing a maid outfit, she was equipped with plate armor, and her defensive abilities were far beyond Leonardo's, who'd sunk most of his points into agility. The fragments of ice and stone missiles just bounced off her with light metallic clangs.

The hand she'd extended was knocked away.

With a ferocious growl and eyes that seemed to be pained by something, Elias had refused it.

Coppélia persisted, reaching out to save him again, and Leonardo pulled her into his arms and leapt sideways.

An enormous guillotine of ice bore down behind them. It was an unreserved certain-kill attack that ignored things like efficiency and hit rate. With a savage scream, Elias unleashed the sort of huge attack he normally wouldn't even have selected.

Holding the petite girl in his arms, Leonardo looked into her eyes.

He saw Elias there, being torn apart by pain.

As the elf brandished his weapon, his warped eyes blazing red, he certainly looked ferocious, but he reminded Leonardo of a colleague who'd grown desperate and reckless and had left his job. The Elias he'd glimpsed during that collapse really hadn't been an illusion.

"This—curse—I'll—"

There probably hadn't been any clear intent behind the words he'd spoken.

They'd been a murmur, half-lost in a growl.

However, Leonardo had heard them, and somehow they made sense to him.

This just ain't gonna work, he thought flatly.

He sensed this, not as a native New York-dwelling geek with a bundle of flow charts and spec sheets under his arm, but as a man who'd spent his youth during the Vital Fall.

Coppélia and Kanami wouldn't be able to get Elias to retake himself by fighting him.

It was up to him.

Leonardo made up his mind so easily that even he thought it was strange.

"Fall back. If you can, get away!"

Shoving the girl in his arms toward Kanami, Leonardo used the kickback from the move and cartwheeled. Once, twice. Adding a twist in midair, he spun like a drill, kicked the ashy indigo beast away, and landed in front of Elias again.

"Hiyaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

It wasn't a skill.

He just spread his arms, tackled Elias with brute force, and dived like an NFL player scoring a touchdown.

They slid across the limestone together—something that probably would have left them thoroughly bloodied all by itself if they'd been in their real bodies on Earth—exchanged two or three well-angled punches, twisted around, and stood up.

"There are some things you just can't complain about to women, huh?" Leonardo said.

Yeah, that's right. Internally, he was nodding vigorously in agreement.

This was what he could do for Elias.

"I dunno what you're feeling, but I know there are times like that. Plus, I've also—"

Which of them had closed in? The distance shrank as if they'd pulled each other in by threads, and the great crystal sword and the twin katanas that spouted flames locked with each other.

"Hup!"

Concluding that he wouldn't be able to hold out, Leonardo kicked Elias's side, then deflected his strength diagonally. Catching him on their crossed blades was the position that had the best defense, but even then, Crystal Stream was two meters long, and he wasn't strong enough to stop it completely.

As a Weapon Attack class, Leonardo's physical strength was superhuman, but he'd chosen to grow it with a bias toward speed and explosive power. In contrast, Elias was an all-around warrior who'd methodically trained both his muscles and his endurance. On top of

that, there was a ten-level difference between them.

In *Elder Tales*, level differences mattered quite a lot.

They weren't the sort of thing you could never reverse, no matter the situation, but they had a big influence on all conflicts. They affected not only attack hit rates and evasion rates, but the possibility of resisting poison and paralysis, and they even affected the actual damage inflicted, too.

A raid capture unit equipped with phantasmal items fought monsters that were between three and seven levels higher than they were, but those were attempts made on a foundation of careful planning and applied strategy. A ten-level difference in a player-versus-player conflict was such a big deal that, generally speaking, it wouldn't even be a fight.

However, Leonardo ignored that inconvenience and attacked boldly, over and over.

There was a series of dull sounds, like steel scraping together or slamming into itself.

Ninja Twin Flames' process-activated ability wasn't able to inflict effective flame damage. Similarly, Elias's weapon was clad in a stream of water and blocked it.

"You're tough."

As Leonardo spoke, his shoulders were heaving.

The speed of exhaustion in solo combat was in a whole different league from team combat. Particularly with attack classes with poor fuel efficiency like Sorcerer and Assassin, if they paid out large damage attacks in earnest, their MP would hit bottom in the space of a few minutes.

Leonardo had attacked without considering the consequences, and he didn't even have half of his left.

He'd had to go that far to actually fight the Ancient. Feeling happy about the fact that the difference in combat power was so great, Leonardo kept on glaring at his opponent.

"You really are best when you're tough, Elias."

It wasn't clear whether those words had gotten through.

However, Elias muttered, "What would you know?" in a voice so hoarse it was hard to make out. His eyes were red and clouded. Then his crystal sword flashed in the last of the sunlight, preparing to strike off Leonardo's head.

Well, no, I don't know.

While he was deep in thought, Leonardo was unleashing a storm of fierce sword slashes.

He wasn't saying he couldn't imagine it. However, it was a fact that Elias's pain belonged to Elias alone.

Leonardo had traveled with him, and he thought he knew the guy's cheerfulness, the way he was honest to the point of stupidity, and the sorrow he'd hidden. He'd also known that he grieved the loss of his comrades and was tormented by the guilt thinking that the loss had been caused by his own lack of strength.

Leonardo only knew about these things, though. He couldn't say he understood them.

He couldn't say so, and he probably shouldn't anyway.

Traveling companions were only slightly closer than strangers, after all.

A burning pain ran through his side.

The disaster was practically a car accident, and his green suit ripped. This defensive gear had focused on stealth performance to begin with, and it had almost no resistance to cold air.

There was a noise like a bell ringing, very faintly.

A sharp blade was thrust out in exchange, and Elias evaded by simply tilting his head. Apparently, it was all he could do just to graze the collar of his white surcoat.

It was the difference in their combat power made visible.

He'd used quite a large percentage of his HP as bait, and yet, grazing the nape of Elias's neck was all he'd had been able to manage.

True, Elias had taken quite a lot of damage by now as well, but that was because he'd been worn down before starting this battle with Leonardo.

Still, that difference in combat power felt good.

If Elias had been weak, he probably would have felt a lot sadder.

"That's what makes you Elias Hackblade after all!"

As if the words Leonardo had said had been an actual electric attack spell, Elias's clouded eyes widened slightly. As if what the Adventurer had pointed out had touched an old wound that wouldn't heal, Elias gave a wounded scream and swung his sword.

He really couldn't afford to take that attack.

The mere aftereffects of the impact that was headed this way would be able to pierce clean through armor. A direct hit from that blade might even cost him all his limbs. Pulling back at the last second, Leonardo swung his twin katanas as well. If he couldn't win through attack size, then he'd attack faster.

“I mean, you’re their friend, right?!”

Even though he thought the words would never get through, Leonardo yelled.

Of course he did. This was a world Elias didn’t know.

And this was something only somebody like Leonardo could tell him:

Elias Hackblade was a shining hero.

Captain America and the invincible Thor, Tony (who was bursting with the engineer spirit), the high-minded Hal Jordan, and Doctor Strange. The world’s ultimate heroes, who shone like a veritable galaxy.

A hero who never lost hope even when he came up against difficulties or despair, who nobly and selflessly protected others—one of those individuals with absolutely indomitable wills who gathered in the hall of fame.

He was one of the people Leonardo idolized.

“I knew about you...even before I met you at the Tekeli Ruins. I’ve known for ages. Elias Hackblade! The world’s one and only Blademancer. An elf hero who belongs to the Knights of the Red Branch, one of the Thirteen Global Chivalric Orders. A blueblood raised by the fairy tribe. The knight who accepted the two-handed sword Crystal Stream, along with the feelings of three Anemoi.”

Elder Tales wasn’t something enjoyed exclusively inside the game itself.

It really wouldn’t have been possible for a single player to discover the countless quests that were scattered across the wide world, and so players shared information. Game information was communicated in all sorts of ways, through strategy sites and bulletin boards, or by word of mouth, and through messengers.

In particular, as was common with MMORPGs, newly introduced events and quests were discussed by lots of users. Since the sort of events Elias appeared in tended to be tied to the main stories of expansion packs, this was especially true of them.

Elias Hackblade was a typical handsome-hero character, as if he’d been packed with the dreams of the game developers. Long, streaming blond hair and sapphire eyes. A white coat and a huge magic sword. He’d appeared in over a hundred quests.

He was one of the most famous characters in the *Elder Tales* game.

Leonardo didn’t know whether it was like that on the other servers, but at least on the North American and European servers, Elias was practically the icon for *Elder Tales*.

He’d met a hero like that in the Tekeli Ruins and had traveled with him.

It had been an encounter the likes of which might never happen again, and a journey straight out of a fantasy.

“Even among the Adventurers, you were famous, Elias Hackblade. The guardian of the People of the Earth. The hero who dashed around, crossing borders; the pride of the Thirteen Global Chivalric Orders. A whole lot of Adventurers have fought beside you. We swapped rumors about you, too.”

“Silence!”

Along with that howl, a storm of ice assailed him.

Elias’s mana was out of control, and winglike shields of ice had grown from his back.

Pushed to action by his rising emotions and sense of duty, Leonardo took another half step toward death.

The ice barrier spell missiles that showered down on him were closer to the size of spears than daggers, and they hit home. Leonardo’s HP was falling sporadically, but as rapidly as a glass of spilled wine.

“No, I’m not gonna shut up. In the Fortress of Darkness, you defended the elves as leader of the Lightbringers, and in the Dragon’s Lair, you confronted the evil dragon Zahat alongside the Adventurers. You used the matchless sword technique Fairy Arts, and sometimes you opposed the Adventurers, but it was always to protect the People of the Earth. You were the guardian of this world, absolutely.”

The word *guardian* seemed to have poleaxed Elias.

He gazed at Leonardo with eyes that looked as if they’d been frozen by eternal grief, and he seemed to be shedding wordless tears.

Leonardo was building a bridge.

He was going to deliver the goodwill of the hundreds and thousands of geeks who’d supported Elias to the last man. As a Delivery Person subclass, that was his mission. He had to teach this dumb, wounded, discouraged hero what he was really worth.

“We knew. That time when you got tricked by the red-nosed Princess Rubience and locked up: In the quest, it said you’d been flattered into drinking a sleeping drug, but the truth is that you felt sorry for that pathetic princess, and so you drank the drug so she’d have someone to talk to, right? During the hunt for the golden boar, weren’t you the one who forgot Tonelico’s Spear at the inn? I know. I... We...”

Naturally, there had been people who hated him, too.

Games were things for players to enjoy. The mere fact that he was

stronger than the players, was something like a main character and could adventure, was enough to earn him hate from haters. The fact that Elias's Blademancer class was an exclusive one that couldn't be selected by the players soured his reputation as well.

However, he'd been liked more than that. When he'd first appeared, he'd been depicted as arrogant, but as time passed, his personality had acquired warmth and a sense of humanity. His curse meant he always had to rely on the Adventurers for the most important things, which was both appreciated and considered comical. They'd called him—affectionately (and a little mockingly)—“Mr. Elias” online.

Naturally, when people talked about him, they teased, sympathized with, and laughed at him. He was a slightly unfortunate hero who desperately argued for peace on their screens but sometimes spoke of tragedies, saying, “My curse sows unhappiness...”

But he had been loved.

He was the character who represented *Elder Tales*, their beloved game. How could he not have been loved?

Particularly by Leonardo, who aspired to be a hero in this world.

What sort of person is he, or she, to you?

He remembered Coppélia's quiet, thoughtful question.

What sort of person was Elias to Leonardo?

He'd had the answer to that one for ages.

“I spent Sacred Heart and the Tower of the Oracle with you. At this point, I dunno how it is, but during that invasion maneuver, I was there with you. I went up that long twilight staircase with you. We sent up that victory cheer together, too. I bet you don't remember. If you think about it that way, the Catastrophe really was genuinely shitty, huh? You were a hero to us, to the Adventurers, too.”

As a pretty decent engineer who stood in front of clients wearing a necktie, he'd just been too embarrassed to say it, but—

—he was a cartoon hero.

Don't make me say totally obvious stuff.

“What hero?! Due to this curse, I can't even save the people who call for me. I watched my comrades die! Even the Words of Death—their echo binds me. All the Ancients are bound by their spell. If it's to tear these chains apart...”

Yes, if it's to tear these chains apart, I believe I would do anything.

Elias's expression was tight and warped. He'd probably drained his MP dry by using all those big techniques. He drew several wheezing breaths, and since his face was dripping wet, it was impossible to tell whether he was crying. That was how much regret

he held inside.

His pain got through to Leonardo.

Elias Hackblade, a legendary hero who was this powerful, renowned, and proud. After fighting this great man—who, if he'd been able to fight properly, would never have had anything but easy victories—Leonardo's HP was down to a mere 25 percent.

But it didn't fall below 25 percent.

It wouldn't.

This Ancient hero, who was at level 100, couldn't even beat a single Assassin. This was why Kanami hadn't fought Elias seriously and in fact hadn't been able to. She'd avoided shoving this result in his face, and their match had turned into a repetitious draw.

"In order to tear these chains apart, I would undertake any hardship. To keep from having anything stolen, to protect the world, I, Elias Hackblade, would discard even the blood of the fairies!"

"That's fine! Go on and try it, Elias! I'll be the villain for you. —A wannabe, as wussy as a frog. C'mon and throttle me to death!"

Strangely enough, both Elias's and Leonardo's remaining HP was around 25 percent. Putting all of that on the line, the two of them clashed. The technique Elias chose was Aqua Thousand Rain, which intermittently released countless ice daggers. Leonardo went with Deadly Dance, which he'd improved over and over again.

The shards of ice were harder than shoddy metal, and Leonardo brandished actual steel, shattering them. The pulverized ice reflected the light in the limestone cavern like diamond dust, turning their surroundings into a world of silver.

Leonardo commended his friend, who'd been born from ink and paper, from modeling tools and code.

He'd idolized the one he'd entrusted his dreams to and had fantasized about one day becoming someone to whom others entrusted theirs.

If he'd said that, as a student, he hadn't dreamed of being a game programmer just a little bit, he would have been lying.

It might have been coercion, and he might have been forcing a role onto him.

However, even so, it was true he wouldn't be able to connect if he didn't step forward.

Traveling companions were only a little closer than strangers.

...But who'd decided that that distance was further than friends?

He'd been invited to a Toon Town party. Leonardo had resolved to become Elias's friend. As far as he was concerned, that wasn't something that would be given to him; it was something to win.

Countless attacks traced complicated tracks of cold and flame in

midair.

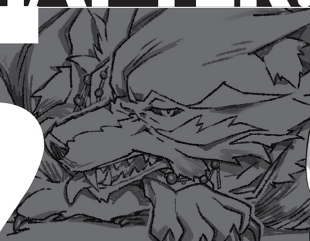
Their exchange was a symphony of shrill echoes and iridescent light.

It was the melody of a new world that Elias and Leonardo needed to learn, and it shaved away just a little of their HP.

CHAPTER.

2

NOT A CURSE



▶ NAME: GUMON	
▶ LEVEL: 92	
▶ RACE: NANNY WOLF	
▶ SUBCLASS: NONE	
▶ HP: 3326	
▶ MP: 3326	
▶ ITEM 1: [SUNNY SPOT RUG] A RUG MADE IN SHIMANAKU, USING PLENTY OF WOOL FROM GRASSLAND SHEEP THAT HUMANS BROUGHT IT, AND IT'S USED AS GUMON'S DEDICATED NAP MATS. SOMETIMES NEARLY OFFICIALS WILL SLIP AWAY FROM THEIR JOBS AND SNEAK IN, AND APPARENTLY GUMON SILENTLY ALLOWS IT.	
▶ ITEM 2: [SILVER CHAIN SASH ORNAMENT] A MAGIC SILVER ACCESSORY THAT HILU PAO AND THE OTHERS DUG OUT OF A STONEHOUSE. IT'S A SASH ADORNED WITH DELICATE SILVER WORKMANSHIP AND LAPS LAZULI BEADS, BUT GUMON WEARS IT AROUND HIS NECK, NOT HIS STOMACH. IT'S A MAGIC-CLASS ITEM WITH A CONFUSION RESISTANCE EFFECT, BUT THE DETAILS ARE UNCLEAR.	
▶ ITEM 3: [SUPERB FRUIT ASSORTMENT] FRUIT PRESENTED TO GUMON BY THE MOUNTAIN ANIMALS, WHO FEAR AND RESPECT HER. SINCE THEY'RE THINGS THAT WERE HARVESTED ON THE MOUNTAIN, THE TYPE AND AMOUNT VARY EACH TIME, BUT THEY USE THEM TO MAKE DESSERTS, AND THIS SEEMS TO BE ONE OF THE THINGS GUMON LOOKS FORWARD TO.	





<Shovel>
A tool used for digging
dirt. Convenient in
various ways.

“Urrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrahh!!”

“Nice, good one! That’s an all-in bet times two!”

“The girl’s a smooth talker, huh, Chun Lu?!”

“I believe her skills are solid, though.”

Naturally, although Enchantress Youren had vanished from the combat arena, the battle hadn’t gotten easy. They were up against a Nue, a half-raid-rank magical beast. With Krusty keeping Enchantress Youren occupied and Leonardo dropping out for a showdown with Elias, Kanami and Coppélia had been left all on their own. There was no way they could match it.

However, the light of mana from the ferocious battle and the destruction of the landscape had summoned reinforcements to them.

“Faithful Blade!!”

“Never mind, just close on in, cover ’em!”

Chun Lu and a man who had the air of a seasoned warrior had appeared, and they launched a surprise strike on the flank of the Nue, which had gone on the offensive.

Kanami was a Warrior class, and Coppélia was a Recovery class. Even if the two of them had managed to buy time, they didn’t have enough attack power to take down the Nue. However, now Chun Lu and her companion, both level 90, had joined in. At this point, they probably wouldn’t lose.

“By the way, who’s this?”

“He’s Zhu Huan, the master of my guild, the Lelang Wolf Cavalry. We met up over there.”

“The Red King faction got taken out by a raid monster. As we tracked them, strange monsters like Eternal Moths and Moon Rabbits showed up, and things got real noisy. We thought this was a guild war, but it’s even nastier.”

“No eating stuff off the ground!”

Kanami landed a spin kick with a heavy thunk. She probably wasn’t thinking anything, but Coppélia attempted to support her based on a conjecture. Apparently, the Nue they were fighting now had fought outside as well, and the subjugation unit had gotten here by

following the scars it had left. The leader of that unit was Chun Lu's boss, Zhu Huan.

That had been lucky.

When it came to getting information here on the continent of Eured, Coppélia's party, led by Master Kanami, had extremely few connections. To continue journeying through a social situation that changed from moment to moment, they'd been shown that they needed simple combat power—naturally—but that it was also vital to have the protection of information and to be affiliated with an influential group.

Kanami and the others (including Coppélia) and Chun Lu's guild were mutually independent, so there was no guarantee their interests would always match up, but even so, it should be possible for them to cooperate on a certain level.

However, Zhu Huan had mentioned "the Red King faction," and that warranted caution. If Coppélia's memories were reliable (which they were), the word *faction* referred to a political community. From Zhu Huan's tone, it was very likely they were either in opposition to or actively hostile toward the Lelang Wolf Cavalry, to which Chun Lu belonged.

In a case like this, according to Coppélia's forecast, Kanami could get pulled into that conflict as well.

However, for the moment, there shouldn't be any problem with putting the issue on hold.

She couldn't deny it was possible they would bring some sort of future disadvantage on themselves by forming a common front with the Lelang Wolf Cavalry here, but it was clear that, at present, their direct combat power fell short by more than 80 percent. Coppélia's calculating side thought they should accept support during this fight, at least.

Meanwhile, the side that had budded and grown during this journey felt, with something that wasn't quite resignation or determination, that Kanami would get pulled into some sort of trouble whether they fought alongside the Lelang or not, and so she simply had to support her.

She certainly couldn't say she had a lot of samples, but in the first place, according to the cases she'd accumulated in the course of their travels, the possibility of Kanami coming into contact with trouble was proportional to time, more than any other parameter. In other words, trouble occurred a set number of times per chronological unit, and there were no prior cases of being able to avoid said trouble through their own efforts.

The fighting grew fiercer.

On a raid where the teamwork between members wasn't good enough, the most important thing was the main tank, who would take all the enemy's attacks. The next most important thing was a Recovery class to support the tank. If they could absorb attacks from the target they were trying to capture, the possibility of sudden destruction was off the table, which gave them the leeway to think about the next stage of the battle: how much damage the attackers could inflict in the meantime.

In that sense, due to the participation of the Lelang Wolf Cavalry members Chun Lu had called in, the fight against the Nue grew more balanced.

In particular, Chun Lu and Coppélia were high-level dedicated healers, and their frontline support abilities were good enough to use even on raids.

At this point, even against the Nue's tremendous electrical attacks, they weren't using a strategy of desperate evasions that risked their resources. Instead, they'd very nearly built an organized defense system based on each class's defense spells.

"Master. Enemy reinforcements sighted. Sixteen monsters approaching. Twenty-four seconds to encounter."

"That's close!"

"Reinforcements incoming! Keep your guards up!"

"They got all the way in here...!"

However, without giving them time to catch their breaths, new monsters began appearing in the large space. They were Moon Rabbits, vanguard physical-attack types, and Eternal Moths, flying monsters with status-corrupting attacks.

On asking, they learned that these monsters had abruptly flooded out of the foothills with enough force to blanket the land.

"The topography is complicated, and search parameters cannot be established. Requesting lenience."

"That's better than our bunch of tactless rubes!"

It was a total melee.

Due to the collapse, several limestone caverns had opened into the big cave. It was possible several underground tunnels had intersected, and a whole area that had grown fragile had collapsed, connecting neighboring caverns to create this massive subterranean area.

The angles and sizes of the limestone caves that made this one up were all different, and they really couldn't keep an eye on all of them as they went.

"Second wave, enemies intercepted. Add nine."

"Pain in the butt!"

At that very moment, like a wad of backed-up muck expelled from a sewer, a swarm of Eternal Moths appeared.

As Master had said, they were troublesome opponents.

If you approached them and breathed in their powdery scales, they stole your MP. Possibly because they were referencing parameters of some sort, the amounts of lost MP varied, and at this point, it wasn't fatal. However, if it accumulated, it would become a resource shortage they couldn't ignore.

Currently, the most efficient way to fight them was for the Monk Kanami—whose resistance was strong—to charge in and intercept them.

However, in a way, that meant she was held back in this cave, and when she thought about managing her master's HP and the raid against the Nue, Coppélia wasn't able to leave, either.

In a raid like this one, where the enemy came in repeated wave attacks, unlike in common examples, the Weapon Attack and Magic Attack classes became important. After all, if they didn't inflict damage and cut down the enemy's numbers, at some point, the tanks would be unable to hold up.

The battle grew hotter and more complicated.

In addition, from somewhere in the distance, she could hear the heavy bass sounds of something massive colliding. From what Coppélia knew, there were another two showdowns being conducted in the foothills.

From the speed and attenuation of the echoes, she could tell that those fights were distant enough that they wouldn't influence them here, but a cluster error of anxiety had formed in her heart.

The enemy was appearing one after another.

It was almost as if Mount Lang Jun had been invaded by demons and had conceived a horde of monsters.

Coppélia had no knowledge about the youth her master called Krus-Krus, but the woman-shaped monster Leonardo kited was Papus, the Genius of Healing. He'd changed his shape, but from his tag stream, the possibility was nearly great enough for certainty. His output seemed to have risen, and even if it had been what it was before, his combat power would have nearly equaled Coppélia's, Master's, and Elias's combined.

Coppélia was also worried about Elias, who had refused her treatment. She hadn't observed a reduction in combat power, but from his condition, he'd clearly been under the influence of a bad status. She didn't know whether her Cure could heal him, but it wasn't all right to just leave him that way.

She was a Cleric. As a recovery magic specialist, she had a responsibility to maintain her companions' health and status. As a matter of fact, you could say it went beyond "responsibility" to

become her reason for existing.

“Master. Lord Elias’s status was abnormal.”

“Uh-huh.”

“We must go to support him.”

“Yeah, but—”

Coppélia held her two Holy Shields in front of her, launching a Punisher attack. This special skill, which fired a light-attribute spell from shields in which the sun’s radiance dwelled, was the closest thing to a maximum-force attack that she had. However, sadly, it was only a healer’s maximum force. She seemed to have managed to dazzle several Moon Rabbits, but she hadn’t even come close to creating a way to break through.

This gap in the enemy forces, which she’d expended precious MP to pry open, was filled back up by the sixth wave of reinforcements. Coppélia relaxed her molars, which she’d been gritting calmly, and slammed her enormous steel shields into the enemy.

Her prediction function warned her that Leonardo was headed for a crisis.

According to her rough calculations, Elias’s comprehensive combat abilities—his attack power, endurance, and defense—were 140 percent of Leonardo’s...and that was a low estimate. If he fought Elias, who had lost his physical control and was rampaging, Leonardo would probably lose his life in the blink of an eye.

Elias was a bit special, but even taking that into consideration, both of them had abilities that put them in the “melee attacker” category. One feature of battles between melee attackers was that, as they struggled, they pushed and shoved at each other, and when this fell apart or approached the critical threshold, both parties expended HP all at once, bringing the match to a conclusion.

Pebbles rattled down from the ceiling.

Near the surface, about six hundred meters to the north, Elias and Leonardo were fighting. She knew that, but at this distance, she couldn’t check their statuses or HP.

Calculating backward from the length of the battle, it wouldn’t have been at all odd for Leonardo to lose his life at this very moment.

“Master.”

“It’s okay,” Kanami told her without turning around.

“Croak-Croak said, ‘Stay back—this guy’s mine!’”

Coppélia wanted to point out that no such thing had happened, but strangely, her looping thoughts seemed to have decreased her arithmetic abilities.

“Just a little longer, and we’ll be able to steamroll these guys, too. First we’ll beat the Nue. Then let’s go pick up Croak-Croak and Eli-Eli,

and Krus-Krus while we're at it."

"Yes, Master."

However, that moment came faster than they'd expected.

All at once, as if it had been cut off, the roar of battle receded, and there was an interruption in the enemy reinforcements, which had been surging toward them in swarms.

The pressure eased. It was most definitely a chance to take the offensive.

The silence that had fallen informed them that the distant fighting had ended. Coppélia and Kanami looked at each other, then charged, intending to take the Nue down in one rush.

► 2

In a subterranean cave where the presence of death hung thickly, Krusty and the Enchantress were continuing their battle, moving slowly and warily.

If she'd stayed near the Nue, its big body would have been used against her as an obstacle, and so, in order to secure a line of fire toward Krusty, the Enchantress had attempted to move their fight. Since it would let him create a one-on-one situation, Krusty had obliged.

"Accursed one—you are holding out well."

"I fear my unworthiness prevents me from fighting you with everything I have."

Krusty was smiling thinly.

He'd meant what he said.

Even now, in this very instant, he was nearing the abyss of death moment by moment. In the first place, Guardians had excellent defense, but they didn't have the HP recovery abilities of a healer.

Obviously, there were exceptions to this, including Krusty's selected build of Scarlet Knight. Instead of a shield, he used a two-handed weapon with an HP absorption effect—the Fresh Blood Demon Ax—and built his fights around its special skills, realizing HP recovery that was normally impossible for warrior classes.

In order to gain even greater HP recovery abilities, it was necessary to increase the damage on which the ratio was based. To that end, people with this build often chose two-handed weapons, and by necessity, they ended up losing their shields. In other words, the essential condition for creating this build was that the increase in artificial endurance that resulted from the HP recovery had to surpass the decreased defense caused by the loss of the shield.

At present, due to the effect of Krusty's curse—"HP may not be recovered through recovery spells, or through facilities or items"—he wasn't allowed to perform his main trick. In other words, not only was his Scarlet Knight build currently unable to recover HP, it couldn't use the defensive power of a shield, either; it was good for nothing, with no advantages whatsoever.

Of course he was able to use the high attack power of his two-handed weapon, but that was all it was. Even if he boosted that attack power, it would fall far below that of an Assassin or other specialist.

"Scarlet Thrust!"

Shining deep crimson, the attack Krusty paid out slashed through three of the snakelike tentacles Enchantress Youren had unleashed. Ordinarily, that red aura would have robbed Krusty's opponent of her HP and given it to him. However, that effect hadn't activated for a while.

"And another!"

A tentacle Krusty had failed to slap down stretched up from his feet, punching at the armor around his waist. The blow wasn't hard enough to pierce it, but the impact was still there, and he lost a little more HP. Seventeen percent remaining.

They'd been repeating this cycle for a while now.

Even worse, apparently Enchantress Youren's attacks had the same HP absorbing ability as the Scarlet build, which was practically a synonym for Krusty. As she attacked him, at the same time, she was gradually recovering the damage he'd worked so hard to inflict. It wasn't so efficient that she'd be unscathed in no time, but it was apparently possible for her to reduce the damage she'd been dealt. Enchantress Youren's HP simply had more volume than it should.

Krusty currently had a handicap, so he couldn't be called strong.

However, all that was separate from winning or losing.

The very fact that he could think this sort of thing as he fought probably counted as proof.

There are things I've grown able to see, too, hmm?

Krusty was picking up on the intentions of the Enchantress, who was probably one of the invaders who had targeted this land. It might have been a more advanced understanding than what the Round Table Council members had, tied up in Akiba as they were.

In short, she and her kind were usurpers.

They were an alien species who had come here with their sights set on the land's overflowing mana. They wielded paranormal powers, and their combat abilities made them equal to raid monsters. They were intelligent, and they were after Theldesia.

Krusty sensed this was what colonialism under the great European powers from the Age of Exploration through the discovery of the New

World must have been like. He didn't think he was that far off the mark.

They probably had enough military might to make this world do whatever they wanted.

However, as Krusty swung his ax, he wore a smile like a starving wolf.

He didn't spare a thought for victory or defeat. He didn't have to.

→ I need accessible resources.

→ Invest them.

He visualized a gate in the center of his chest, then commanded it to activate.

The impression Krusty had was of the gate to a magnificent temple with round, Doric columns. Behind a marble door covered in carvings lay a spring swirling with liquid light. If Krusty fed it with his memories, it would generate a rainbow radiance.

The name "Mnemosyne's Taboo" surfaced in his mind. This technique apparently converted memories into energy.

The units of energy were minuscule, so it was impossible to express the efficiency of the exchange, but from Krusty's perspective, it was more than enough. All he had to do was feed in a teaspoon of the taste of a martini at a boring party, for example, or the feel of a muffler that had been unexpectedly wrapped around him on a footpath beside an Amsterdam canal, or the gaze of a relative who'd glared at him in annoyance, and he'd get several thousand, or several tens of thousands, of MP.

Krusty immediately switched from Taunting Shout to a large-scale range attack with Onslaught.

In *Elder Tales*, MP was a high-rarity resource. When you weren't fighting, you could recover it rapidly without much trouble, but during battle, you only recovered a few dozen points per minute... And that was at Krusty's level, with his equipment. In a battle where you didn't have support from an Enchanter or a Bard, it was a resource that barely recovered at all.

That precious resource filled his body, flooding in through the micro-gate in the center of his chest. Its speed was on the order of several tens of thousands of points per second. His MP didn't fluctuate from its maximum, but because the amount of excess recovery alone was more than the amount he was consuming, it looked as if it wasn't falling below the maximum. Not only that, but a rainbow-colored shimmer radiated from his entire body, reinforcing major elements in combat—everything from attack power and defense to his special skill recast times.

The sharp blade, which he swung with enough momentum to burn the air, inflicted steady damage on Enchantress Youren.

Hardened tentacles and the weapon Krusty wielded clashed twice, three times.

The damage per second he was inflicting wouldn't have been possible for a Guardian in the days of *Elder Tales*, and the Enchantress's beautiful face warped in astonishment.

"What are these slashes?!"

"A parlor trick."

Condescending tone in hand, Krusty charged, not hiding his ghastly smile. He sealed his opponent's resistance with a mighty close-range attack like a body blow, then shifted into a rush, in which the attack itself acted as defense. Under these circumstances, he didn't have to worry about running out of MP. *He had all the fuel he could ever want.*

The Enchantress froze up, startled, for just a moment. Then she desperately began to defend herself.

In this situation, the whole of the battle was simultaneous attack and defense. They couldn't use skills like Parry or Evade. One had an enormous ax, the other had countless tentacles that sprouted from her sleeves, and they both slammed attacks that emphasized the quantity of blows into each other. The only thing you could call defense were the attacks they launched at each other. Attacks that weren't shot down struck their opponent.

With blood trickling from his cheeks, Krusty cheerfully threw himself into the center of this raging storm.

Under his hands, Enchantress Youren was being annihilated, a problem being solved. Possibilities were converging on the result of victory, or of defeat. Each step on that route was pleasure. Right now, Krusty was on the verge of obtaining a new result.

"Why, why?!"

However, there was someone who wasn't happy about this.

It was Enchantress Youren, with whom he was trading attacks.

She ground her teeth in frustration, then turned her practically defenseless back on him. It wasn't that her soft, feminine curves had made him hesitate, but a momentary gap opened up in Krusty's fierce onslaught. He'd grown wary of an unknown counterstrike.

Sure enough, the Enchantress did strike back.

With a sticky sucking sound, a huge wave of gray tentacles burst from below Enchantress Youren's feet, undulated, and closed in.

However, they weren't headed for Krusty.

They angled away, rushing toward the shadow of the rocks, charging toward Hua Diao—who was standing as still as a sculpture,

looking blank. In the midst of time that seemed drawn out, Hua Diao tried to scream something.

→ Block the attack.

→ I can't.

→ Take the damage for her with Covering.

→ Out of range.

Reflexively, Krusty tried to protect her, but it wasn't possible.

Guardian strategies for protecting companions were mostly built around controlling aggro, and their abilities regarding protecting friends from damage directly were far below those of Monks. If Kanami had been here, things might have gone differently, but she was nowhere in sight. During their ferocious fight, they'd kept moving, and it had divided the battlefield.

When his eyes met Hua Diao's, she looked apologetic. The next instant, she was covered by a surging gray wave like a muddy torrent, and she disappeared from view.

Martenfolk were noncombatant demispirits, and for one of them, the damage was too great. It could be nothing but fatal.

However—

—Gumon the wolf dog leapt in like a meteor.

She must have summoned up all her abilities in order to come running. With the impenetrable defense of her agility, it would have been easy for her to avoid Enchantress Youren's attacks, and yet, in order to save Hua Diao, Gumon exposed her defenseless side. The Wise Wolf had made a clearheaded decision, and she chose speed over self-preservation.

Even though the price was her life.

With a light of deep understanding in her eyes, even as she shed a shocking amount of blood, the wolf took the nape of Hua Diao's neck in her mouth, sped back to Krusty's feet in a single leap, and set the girl down. She gave a low, satisfied groan and lay down herself.

And then she became bubbles of gently shining rainbow light.

The world is brimming over with the difficult problems you seek.

Your world, your problem, is easy because you aren't looking for treasure.

I think those around you would be happier if you were a little greedier.

Those with abilities should have intense desires to match, don't you think, Milord?

He heard a calm voice.

The bubbles rose toward heaven, and what remained was a

woman's severed arm, with slim fingers. It was wrapped in a piece of a D.D.D. uniform and had been cut off near the shoulder. It was [REDACTED]'s arm.

► 3

Having completely absorbed Gumon's life, Enchantress Youren had recovered her health drastically, and she smiled sweetly.

Krusty's HP was down to just 8 percent.

In contrast, Enchantress Youren's HP was over 60 percent, and still rising.

The gap was great enough that she could feel sure of her victory. Even if he'd managed to gain nearly limitless MP through Mnemosyne's Taboo, with no means of recovering his HP, Krusty had no way to turn the tables at this point.

"That was astonishing."

"..."

"I doubt you remember, but I would expect no less from the Adventurer the Supreme Deity and the Heavenly Mother wanted for her nephew. —I'll ask again: I don't suppose you'd surrender to us?"

"Are you telling me to play at being a sheepdog?"

"I promise you the most fortunate of canine lifestyles."

In response to this, his expression still cool, Krusty smiled.

The woman was funny.

Had she noticed she'd confessed to talking to a dog?

Or maybe she had wanted to believe it was actually the other party that was the dog.

Even answering her properly seemed like too much work.

"The tiger-fanged Bucaphi, Genius of Witches, wasn't it?"

"?! Don't tell me your memories have—"

With a light *click*, some sort of piece fell into place. At the same time, the flow of his blood sped up, accelerating into a raging torrent. With the thrill of understanding in his eyes, Krusty smiled fearlessly.

The reality of something being "stolen" had closed the circuit.

Pushing a mental arm through the gate up to its shoulder, he groped through a rainbow ocean as warm as his viscera. The true identity of the heat that made his breath tremble was a complicated emotion. It was amusement, and also irritation. Delight and anger were there together.

The feeling was hard to put a name to, but it definitely did have heat. Keeping the emotion just as it was, he began to take them back,

ripping them free.

“The curse—! What happened to the curse that bound you?!”

“It hasn’t been lifted.”

As Krusty had sensed, there was still a negative status on his translucent window.

SOUL DARKENING CURSE.

NATURAL HP RECOVERY IS SUSPENDED.

HP MAY NOT BE RECOVERED THROUGH RECOVERY SPELLS, OR THROUGH FACILITIES OR ITEMS.

THE TELECHAT FUNCTION IS SUSPENDED.

MOVEMENT ACROSS SERVER BOUNDARIES BECOMES IMPOSSIBLE.

MEMORIES ARE LOST.

However.

“It doesn’t say I can’t retake the memories I lost.”

As he’d said, a new condition was added, the words seeming to bleed into existence.

The Enchantress looked pale and dismayed, and Krusty sent her a savage smile.

Through the gate, he retrieved the memories that had melted into rainbow colors. Once he’d retaken them, it also became clear why he’d chosen those memories and released them. Krusty had foreseen that he would take them back.

He’d been sure he would recover them, so he’d offered them up as collateral.

Because he’d known they would come back someday, he’d relaxed and temporarily deposited them elsewhere.

When he was caught up in Calamity Hurts’s rampage in the mountains near Seventh Fall, Krusty had landed on Mount Kumlun, a solitary island that floated in a distant rainbow ocean. On that island, he’d met the grotesque witch Bucaphi. She had wanted him to become her vassal, but he had refused, and as a result, he’d been hit with a bad status that robbed him of nearly all his combat power, then banished into the wilderness of central Eured. Even the memory of his encounter with Bucaphi had been taken from him.

That was what lay behind Krusty’s arrival in this land.

However, those memories were back in his hands now.

They’d been accompanied by memories of the chaperone of his noisy guild, his precocious little sister, his reliable aide, and the reckless slacker princess. As this information flowed in, filling the gaps, he gave a little smile that was different from the one he’d shown the Enchantress.

He’d been unable to hold back a wry smile at his own romanticism.

Even if he'd had memories and connections, the benefits he could gain from them were limited. Still, Krusty didn't have the sort of temperament that took delight in giving up part of himself.

He also understood the cause of the hostility that blazed inside him.

He'd already faced off against the enemy's leader on Mount Kunlun. Now that he'd retaken his memories, he knew this clearly. As far as he was concerned, the bewitching woman who'd held him in contempt and had brazenly shown up to take him was already a target for annihilation. He had absolutely no intention of forgiving her.

Papus—this woman, Enchantress Youren—and the Queen Mother of the West, Bucaphi: Everyone who had risen against Krusty and his memories was an enemy. Now that his memories were clear, her true name was displayed in his status window. Apparently, that was the limit of her mimicry.

It was likely that Enchantress Youren and her cohorts were connected to the mystery of the Catastrophe.

They probably had useful information on the current state of the world.

However, that wasn't the tiniest speck of a reason for letting them live.

"Simply regaining your memories does nothing to change the situation!" she shrieked.

"That's right."

...But so what?

Krusty hadn't taken any notice of the situation in the first place.

The important thing was producing a conclusion. That, and the motive for seeking it.

Compressing the distance between them, which was already the space of a breath, he swung his ax, now scattering rainbows instead of blood. The motion surpassed even Adventurer limits, and if Nyanta had been watching, he might have sensed something similar to Kazuhiko in it. However, right now, Krusty was trembling with the joy of birth, and he wielded his blade like a song.

He instinctively knew where Mount Kunlun was.

It was on the horizon of heaven, somewhere Krusty couldn't currently reach.

However, his enemies were there, and he'd resolved to destroy them.

Therefore, he should be able to sink his fangs into the place.

The enemy: That had been the thing he'd given up on ever obtaining in his lifetime, what he'd grown tired and endlessly weary over.

The people who'd whispered "Give up" to Haruaki Kounoike might always have said it out of kindness, but they hadn't loved him deeply.

However, Krusty had been told to seek people who would adore him. By his little sister, and by Takayama, and by Riezé. By Koen and Richou, too. Now that he thought about it, Kushiyatama had said it as well, long ago. With the resolve of someone throwing herself into the flames, Raynesia had shown that she was looking. Even if she understood that her own abilities wouldn't be enough, that stubborn princess hadn't given up on wanting.

Krusty had given up his expectations for those around him, but even in the knowledge that they might rip and fall away easily, she'd clung to them. That hadn't been weakness. It had been nobility.

That night, Krusty had witnessed that nobility.

If he was going to adventure, then what situation could be better than this one, where he'd been transported to a foreign country? Enemies and companions, obstacles and treasures were a solid reality in this vast, white land.

Now that he thought about it, Shiroe and Isaac, and even William, who'd left for the north, had all attempted to make their mark on this world.

Right now, Krusty was emphatically free.

The feeling infused the joints in his arms and legs with the sort of energy that made him want to set off running immediately.

Of course, he'd have to return to Yamato. D.D.D. was a comfortable place. It was his treasure, even if he hadn't been aware of that. He had no intention of letting it be taken from him.

However, in order to get there, it looked as if he'd have to defeat all his enemies...or maybe someone would come to get him before that happened.

Possibly she'd been overawed by the colorless rage that had quietly accumulated inside Krusty: Enchantress Youren issued an order in a carrying voice. A froth of iridescent bubbles gathered in what had been empty space, and a swarm of giant moths appeared from it and attacked him.

"That's nothing—"

He slashed through them.

At this point, his enormous two-handed ax was so light it might as well have been made of paper. Actually, Krusty's very limbs were filled with inexhaustible energy, and they massacred his enemies just as he wanted them to. As if he'd shed his skin, even the air currents felt fresh, and his sharpened nerves picked up the enemy's movements easily.

“The forces summoned from the moon are limitless. Even if you are beyond the bounds of common sense, how do you plan to oppose numbers like these? On top of that, your life is already a lamp flame, guttering in the wind.”

Impatiently, the Enchantress issued rapid-fire invasion orders.

The Moon Rabbits attacked, comically, their fat bellies wobbling. Krusty drew several of them to himself at once, then knocked the pestles they brandished away, sending them flying.

Even as he operated the micro-gate, with exquisite focus, Krusty closed the distance between them.

Half a step, then another.

His Demon Ax, from which heavy sounds issued, finally inflicted a deep wound on the Enchantress’s tentacles.

He’d sliced off the tentacles with herculean strength, and turning iridescent, they were absorbed into his ax, where they became a red pulse. It was the HP absorption ability he was supposed to have lost.

“—?! But every way you could have recovered was sealed...”

“Your curse is full of holes.”

Krusty’s eyes skimmed across a translucent window. Shining red letters were being added to the Soul Darkening Curse display: HOWEVER, MEMORIES MAY BE RECOVERED. HOWEVER, IT IS POSSIBLE TO STEAL HP FROM GENIUSES.

The calculator known as “a lifetime” ran on life force.

The iridescent, crystalline bay that operated on that principle was an external calculator Krusty could connect to easily. He was reusing that rainbow energy to make additions to the curse.

He remembered Shiroe giving him an explanation, in bits and pieces, in a military tent.

He’d been explaining the possibilities and concept of the skill he’d called the Contract Technique.

The key lay in balancing the risk-cost and rewards with the weight of the act of establishing the contract. The immense cost, which included phantasmal materials, was expended to guarantee the effect gained from the contract, and the mutual agreement of each party acted as the ignition key.

“What are you saying...?”

“You may not be able to understand it. In simple terms, your master went overboard.”

That was right.

What Shiroe had excavated from the foundations of the world was the idea of balance.

Desires that could be granted with the Contract Technique probably extended to everything you could think of. It was terribly

powerful and specialized toward granting wishes, and it thought of nothing else; a Mystery that could be considered Shiroe himself. However, it did have clear limits and restrictions. One of these was the cost required to draw up the contract.

The physical contract for the Contract Technique had to be created by a specialist, and it called for expensive materials that corresponded to the scale of the wish—fantasy-class things. In addition, both to draft it and to conclude the contract, the majority of Shiroe's MP had been lost, and he'd had the greatest capacity among those on his level. To grant a wish, a price had to be paid. That price also had to be commensurate to the wish. On top of that, for the Contract Technique to take effect, the involved parties had to agree and sign it. Shiroe certainly had the sword that cut the Gordian knot, but in order to swing it, he needed the other party's consent.

The Contract Technique wasn't an all-powerful spell; it was a clumsy, roundabout method with terrible cost performance. That was the impression Krusty had gotten from listening to Shiroe, and it was also probably what Shiroe himself really thought.

On the other hand, the Soul Darkening Curse truly was powerful. In this world, where resurrection from death was possible, its penalties were even more aggressively vicious than death itself.

Its effect had been big. Too big.

It was too convenient for the aggressor, and too much of a disadvantage for Krusty.

Compared was the Contract Technique, its cost performance was too good, it didn't require the consent of its subject, and it was far too unilateral. For being magic techniques in the same world, they were impossibly distant from each other.

That was the weakness of the Soul Darkness Curse. In the balanced world of the Spirit Theory that Shiroe had spoken of, its overpowering effect was extremely unstable.

It would have been one thing if Krusty had given his consent, but they'd had to force it on him arbitrarily; it had been effective after a fashion up until now only because it had been harshly branded onto him with the MP of Bucaphi, the Genius of Witches, a level-150 figure who vastly outranked him. However, to Krusty as he was now, in terms of sheer MP, he had the means to oppose it, even if it had come from someone whose level was twice his own.

If trust had been part of the picture...

If they'd been equals...

If he'd at least consented...

In any of those cases, the curse would doubtless never have been broken, but Krusty tore it apart easily. He didn't have a scrap of the

sweet temperament that would have obeyed something unfair.

Enchantress Youren, half panicking, thrust out sharp talons. However, he grabbed her arm with a gauntlet like solid iron, crushing it under his fingers, and when he swung it around with all his might, it tore free and flew off.

Showing no mercy whatsoever, Krusty immediately unleashed Armor Crush, making the very material that formed the Enchantress's arm disappear. Now Enchantress Youren had one arm, just like Takayama. Everything about Krusty's attack had been magically strengthened by overflowing MP, by Empathiom.

"Wha—? Do you think an outrage like this will be permitted—?"

"I don't want to hear that from someone who steals others' memories and degrades them into puppets."

She didn't understand the dangers of winning too much. That made her less than second-rate.

Krusty felt pain, as if all the nerves in his body were being torn, and it made him smile. That torment was the price he had to pay for victory. He didn't need an overpowering victory, or an overwhelmingly advantageous contract, or unilateral exploitation. Even if those led to a temporary victory, they wouldn't give him a sustainable win.

The thin-ice victory Krusty wanted was a reality he needed in order to continue winning, and to keep from winning too much.

As relentlessly as an icy wind, Krusty carved wounds into the Enchantress. First one, then another.

Their HP grew closer, competed, and drew even.

"Having been soiled with defeat once, I learned about the Adventurers and the Ancients. I degraded Elias and entrapped you, and certain victory was in my hands, and yet—I wasn't careless; I knew very well how violent you were. How, why...?"

That was probably carelessness right there, Krusty thought.

How slipshod would you have to be to include nothing but your opponents' violent natures in your assessment?

Had she been planning to buy Manhattan Island with glass beads?

Krusty didn't know that it had been Kanami's party that had defeated Enchantress Youren in the form of the Genius Papus. Knowing wouldn't have changed how he dealt with her. Even now, he had no intention of explaining the reasons behind the Enchantress's defeat to her.

Even though he was in the middle of a battle, he just shrugged.

Before they knew it, they were surrounded with piles of dead Moon Rabbits and Eternal Moths that were beginning to turn iridescent. The echoes of the pair's fight had turned the animals into

corpses before they could even get a shot in.

Apparently, the backup the Enchantress had been counting on had run out.

“You seem to have misunderstood.”

Speaking to her ironically, Krusty raised his weapon for the killing blow.

This wasn’t worth drawing out.

Just now, countless possibilities had disappeared into the darkness.

The routes of everything had converged, and the results were being integrated and consolidated.

The time for the answer—the end—had come.

“I wasn’t ‘entrapped.’ I was just resting, and I expect Elias only lost his way.”

“You lie—!”

“My condolences on your loss.”

With a heavy sound, the Fresh Blood Demon Ax fell, splitting Enchantress Youren in two from the top of her head all the way down to her groin, then sank deep into the hard limestone.

Dust hung in the air around him, and the reverberations echoed into the enormous cavern.

The area was wrapped in silence, as if the sounds of combat had been an illusion.

In the midst of that hushed gloom, Krusty pulled his ax free with a ponderous scraping noise, then looked at the thing that had been Enchantress Youren with eyes that no longer held any interest.

A few moments later, it turned into a cloud of rainbow bubbles.

As with all questions, there was meaning only in the path that led to the answer, and once it was over, it was no more than the faded past.

The Enchantress had died.

The cause of her defeat had been excessive disdain for her targets and the fact that she’d given herself too great an advantage.

If you had no respect for something, you probably didn’t even consider trying to understand it.

If you didn’t understand the opponent you were competing against, you couldn’t win.

It sounded like a paradox, but to win, you had to respect your opponent.

She’d overlooked that trivial yet important truth.

“Results. That’s all there is.”

Muttering, Krusty began to walk back into the cave, which had regained its stillness. When he’d walked a few steps, he turned back

again, and there was no longer any crazed heat in his expression. When Hua Diao ran up and clung to him, he scooped her up in his arms.

► 4

“Yeah, yeah. Your knees are quaking over there, hero! Are you even trying? An old grandma carrying her Chihuahua in Central Park puts a little more effort into this stuff, y’know?”

“Hold your tongue!”

Elias raised his sword, which seemed so massive one got the illusion it was the mountain itself, and put more strength into his left leg, which had been on the verge of shaking. It was frustrating, but Leonardo’s comment had been right on the mark: Even a newborn fawn would probably have walked a bit better.

He swung his great fairy sword, Crystal Stream, less as if he were bringing it down than as if its weight was pulling his center of gravity.

Elias felt resistance, as though he were surrounded by water, and grimaced. With every moment, that resistance bound him more firmly, and even though all he was doing was swinging his sword down, it felt as if he were moving through lead. As a result, Elias’s attack turned into something as childish as a little kid’s make-believe swing, and it shaved away half of half of 1 percent of Leonardo’s HP.

Leonardo’s expression was fierce and bright, but he was covered with mud and dust, and he looked as if he’d reached the acme of exhaustion. Elias’s attacks seemed to shove him, rather than cut him. Leonardo put on a fearless smile and tried to shrug it off, but his feet tangled up, and he stumbled.

“I’m seeing zero damage, Blademancer.”

“Look at your own HP, Frog-Man!”

Gasping and panting as he yelled back, Elias stabbed his two-handed sword into the rock. He couldn’t stand properly, either, and he leaned on the sword, catching his breath.

Leonardo’s HP was down to nearly nothing.

Even though they were both muddy, if you only looked at the numbers, Elias’s overwhelming victory seemed assured. However, that fact was superficial. To shave his HP down to this level from 25 percent, Elias had spent over an hour attacking. Ordinarily, this sort of damage wouldn’t even have taken thirty seconds to inflict, but he’d mustered up all his strength and pared it away with soul-searing determination.

Up until the point his HP was down to 10 percent, he’d been able

to fight with passion.

After that, each single percentage point was as hard as digging his way through a massive steel rock with his bare hands, and by now, the only thing that kept him moving was sheer pride.

Elias was losing track of why he was here, and he stood there on just one thought, as if desperately clinging to a rock in the middle of a raging torrent: the idea that he had to overcome the curse.

His movements were clearly going downhill, and the decline in his own motor abilities made him want to cover his eyes. The fairy curse that kept him from lowering his combat opponent's HP below 25 percent of its maximum ruthlessly restricted his actions.

He didn't know why, but he seemed to have overcome that restriction. At present, he'd cornered Leonardo to the point where he was right on the edge. However, the curse hadn't been lifted. That was clear from the handicap constricting around him.

Leonardo was single-mindedly taking Elias's attacks.

It probably wasn't an easy trial. Adventurers who had acquired sophisticated fighting techniques had instincts that made them avoid attacks half-unconsciously. Leonardo was negating that, using only his will.

Elias's magic sword and its swirling streams of water could cleave a boulder in two. That was what he was leaving himself open to. He was probably shot through with the sort of ferocious pain that would make him have to clamp down on his terror.

Even Elias knew these things.

They'd fought several hundred exchanges in this extreme environment, where damage was attenuated. That was enough times for them to have communicated what was in their hearts.

"Hey, hero. Elias. How long have you had your mind back?"

"..."

Elias was at a loss for words.

As Leonardo had said, at this point, he could barely feel that mental cloudiness.

From time to time, pain ran through his head, but his memories of having been taken in by a female monster named Enchantress Youren, and of having turned his blade on his companions, were vivid.

Even if he had been manipulated, the very fact of that manipulation was guilt and humiliation enough to sear him to the core. On top of that, the manipulation hadn't been all; the words that had spilled out of Elias had been the sense of inferiority that smoldered inside him, which made it even more painful.

In extreme terms, the fact that he hadn't been able to stop fighting was simply due to his pride.

You could even say he'd been fascinated by the damage he was continuing to inflict beyond 25 percent.

However, now that Leonardo had seen through him, Elias let go of the battle he'd continued to fight and hung his head.

"Leonardo..."

"It's fine; I don't care. Quit looking like that."

Leonardo threw out his chest as he spoke, even though he was covered in damage, then walked unsteadily up to Elias and stuck a fist into his cheek.

It was a parody of a punch.

He hadn't put his back into it; he'd folded his thumb into the clenched fist he'd raised, and frankly speaking, it marked him as an obvious amateur. However, Elias didn't even have the strength to evade that whack, and he took it clumsily, staggered two or three steps, and fell. His physical responses were too dulled to even let him fall safely, and he landed on his face on the rocks. He was ridiculous, and it made him smile thinly.



“How d’ya like that?”

“How...am I sup...posed to...?”

Elias lay on the rocks like a wooden doll. Realizing he didn’t even have the strength to get to his feet, he gave up and managed, with great difficulty, to roll onto his back.

His whole body felt as hot as if it had been burned, and in that sense, the cool floor of the limestone cave was comfortable. It seemed as though this heat was his foolish self, and the land was gently reproaching him for it.

“It was a terrible punch... You looked like an amateur.”

“Huhn.”

Even he thought the words were terribly spiteful.

Even though he’d caused him so much trouble, even though he’d actually targeted his life, even though he himself was the only one to blame, Elias couldn’t even apologize meekly. In the end, even now, the fairy curse still bound him. Not only had he attacked Leonardo without so much as letting him argue, he hadn’t managed to complete that attack. His guilt at having done him harm and a feeling of inferiority over not having been able to fully accomplish that harm were fighting inside him.

A feeling of inferiority about the curse and regret that scorched him like heavy oil still bound Elias in the depths of the darkness.

It was true he’d been deceived by Enchantress Youren, but Elias knew that wasn’t the whole reason. As proof, even when the mania had died down, the bad feelings that prickled like a festering wound wouldn’t go away.

Moving very cautiously, as if he was being careful of his joints, Leonardo sat down cross-legged on the rock near Elias, then heaved a big sigh. In terms of HP, he was far closer to “death” than Elias.

Elias had about 10 percent remaining, but Leonardo was below 2 percent. His condition could have been described as “at death’s door.”

Naturally, HP was an indicator of the strength to endure injuries and damage, and it had nothing to do with stamina or accumulated fatigue. For that reason, the pair’s exhaustion wasn’t directly due to HP, but even if that was the case, at this point, when they were both at their limits, there was hardly any difference between them.

“Why did you go along with something this foolish?” Elias asked.

If Leonardo had felt like it, he could have ended Elias’s life a hundred times. That last 10 percent of his HP had been a distance of thousands of miles to Elias, but Elias’s HP couldn’t have been that way for Leonardo.

He probably wouldn’t have been able to manage it in one attack,

but he should have been able to tear him up by the roots in the space of two breaths. Leonardo had held his weapons at the ready at first, but ultimately, he'd sheathed them in order to keep Elias company in his desperation.

It had been an incomprehensible act, the meaning of which was unclear.

In response to that question, Leonardo's eyes widened a bit, and he shrugged his shoulders with a sigh. His attitude was teasing, as if to say, *What kind of dim-witted lines are you spouting?*

Elias was struck with shame. He hadn't thought himself wise, but it was likely that he was deeply foolish.

This affair had left Elias thoroughly disgusted with himself. Up until now, people had flattered him, calling him the Ancients' hero and the strongest knight, and he'd gotten full of himself. Now he was filled with the desire to burn that self to the ground. He couldn't rescue his comrades, and he couldn't save the People of the Earth. He felt he had no value, and his existence seemed like an irredeemable crime.

However, what Leonardo said to him was something he hadn't anticipated at all.

"That 'fairy curse' thing is broken already, right?"

Dumbfounded, Elias forgot both the pain and his fatigue and bolted upright, then protested through the awful pain that resulted: "That's not true—!" ...Even if most of the line only came out as a groan.

"My HP went below 25 percent, and you kept chipping away at it."

Come to think of it, he might be able to say that the curse had partially eased.

However, it wasn't that simple. After all, Leonardo didn't know anything.

Even as he realized that the objection itself was an arrogant thought that patronized his comrade, Elias's heart couldn't stop trying to justify itself. Even he thought it cowardly and base, but his warped and nearly crushed soul seem to be looking for an escape route, and it was liable to cling to even these lame excuses.

"With speed like that, I really couldn't overtake you... I accomplished nothing!"

For that reason, he couldn't look Leonardo in the eyes; he averted his own gaze and shouted loudly.

It was exactly the sort of deceptive attitude a cornered failure would take.

"I see."

Leonardo didn't seem bothered by Elias's bluff.

The light that shone in from some vague source was already the madder red that announced the end of the day, alerting them to the arrival of the indigo veil.

In the cave that had lost the light and was slowly growing darker, illuminated by a strange glow like residual battle heat from their magic items, the two of them sat quietly.

Elias didn't know what he should do, and there was nothing he could say.

"—And anyway, was that what you wanted, to kill somebody? You want to kill, so you want to get rid of the curse that keeps you from killing?"

"...What?"

As far as the words went, Elias understood Leonardo's question, but he couldn't quite grasp its meaning. He didn't know what Leonardo was asking.

Do I want to kill someone?

Do I want to kill Leonardo, for example?

No, not at all.

I don't think I do.

In that case, why was I trying to rid myself of this curse?

In order to protect my companions, and the people.

Something had gotten oddly twisted.

Managing to lean his upper body back against a boulder, Elias stared at the palms of his hands. They were bloodied and covered in wounds. They seemed unfamiliar to him, filthy like that.

Even if someone had explained it to him, he wouldn't have known what was going on. Possibly because of the lingering heat of the fight, he couldn't figure out what Leonardo was trying to say. He was irritated by his clumsiness, but his whole body was exhausted, and it wouldn't let him do as he pleased.

"I've never met any, but do fairies do stuff like that? Why did they order you to do something like that? *And anyway, is that actually a curse?*"

"Not...a curse?"

Elias mulled the words over, slowly, and when he understood them, he looked at Leonardo as if he'd been stung.

It was a possibility he'd never even considered.

The fairy curse was a part of him. He'd felt as if it was a component he was used to and couldn't cut away, and he hadn't even been conscious of it.

Then what in the world was this handicap?

Was he saying that this thing, which had bound Elias and forced him to taste despair and loss, wasn't a curse?

“Right. Comic fans like me don’t call stuff like that curses. —It’s your oath, in solid form. Elias, it’s not that you can’t kill. I know that. You don’t want to kill anybody, no matter who they are, so you kept that oath inside you. It’s not just monsters. People of the Earth and Adventurers and Ancients, too.”

Those weren’t words.

The things that were issuing from Leonardo’s mouth were definitely not words.

They were something from a higher dimension, something quiet, yet infused with immense energy.

Without being conscious of it, Elias tensed up, eyes widening, and waited to hear what would come next.

“Remember red-nosed Princess Rubience. That day, you should have been able to flatten all her mercenaries and make a run for it. There was enough of a strength difference for you to pull it off. But you chose to become a hostage, without fighting. Elias Hackblade didn’t fail to kill because he lost out to a curse. He didn’t want to kill, so he didn’t.”

He was right.

When had he lost sight of that?

The remark pierced Elias like a divine revelation.

He hadn’t wanted to kill.

He’d chosen a path that was more difficult, rather than salvation gained by crushing someone and killing them.

Hadn’t Elias studied fairy swordsmanship because he thought it held enough power to resolve situations without killing his opponent?

What Elias found in Leonardo’s words were the tracks of his own resolve, the path he’d walked when he was young. He’d forgotten it entirely, had assumed it had never been there, but when he turned and looked, there it was, stretching from his own feet back into the past.

The heat that flowed down through him made it impossible for him to raise his head.

“I know that. I read your story...straight from you. That’s why I’ve got your back.”

“Ahh... Ah, agh, ghk...”

Before he knew it, Elias was crying.

He sniffled pathetically.

The “strongest Ancient” was sobbing openly.

If that was true, then what an error he’d committed!

If that was true, what a roundabout way he’d traveled!

However, that remorse wasn’t like the torment that had plagued him up until a moment ago.

It was a harsh, cutting pain, but it was the pain of the acceptance

he needed in order to keep walking, making these footprints continue into the future.

“What you’ve got there is a *geas*, a vow. It’s your power, which you got in order to accomplish something... It’s not a curse; don’t hate on yourself like that.”

Dazzling light flooded from Elias’s left arm, becoming a spreading vortex of rainbow radiance. It plunged through the rock, soaked into the earth, healed the broken trees, healed the small, wounded mountain animals, then rose to the horizon of the sky, gazing up at the morning star in the lingering light.

The curse had been a frail, fleeting thing.

It had been more like a string made from twisted paper than an iron chain, something so fragile it could be destroyed just by doubting it.

Elias had hated his shackles. He’d seen them as a curse that bound him—but that was precisely what had made them a curse. They had absorbed his envy and resentment, had grown endlessly obese, and had become a black blight.

However, those shackles had also been a binding oath.

Illuminated by Leonardo’s morning sun, the curdled darkness cleared.

Seen in the light, it wasn’t a grudge that would hurt Elias.

Just now, he’d been released from it.

He’d retaken his vow, the pride he’d had all along.

► 5

By the time Krusty and Hua Diao reached that bright room, Kanami’s party was already assembled there.

The room was in a neatly structured underground ruin that was all straight lines, surrounded by solid walls. It was a basement floor made up of halls and cramped corridors as far as the eye could see, stairways that folded back on themselves again and again, and dead ends piled with jumbled magical equipment made of metal.

It’s the ruin of some sort of modern building. A broadcasting station?

That was Krusty’s guess.

If he recalled correctly, those were called *dian shi tai* in China.

Guided by the sound of noisy voices, he headed deeper in and discovered Kanami, who was excitedly running her hands all over the ruin. Pulling an indigo-haired girl who looked like a maid around with her, she was knocking on the walls, investigating the desks, and putting a hand to her chin and striking poses in front of magic items.

Elias, the guy who'd attacked Krusty, and a man in a green bodysuit were sitting by the wall, looking completely worn out.

Those four must be the traveling group Kanami had told him about. He understood that, but the contrast between the two women's gaiety (especially Kanami) and the exhaustion of the two men was so sharp it was brutal.

Krusty concluded that not getting involved here was the right thing to do. Fortunately, he had another acquaintance in this big room who seemed likely to help him solve the mysteries of this situation.

"Hey there. That was a hell of a thing to happen, wasn't it?"

"Master Zhu Huan!"

Hua Diao jumped up to greet him. As she'd said, this wild-looking man was Zhu Huan. He was also one of Krusty's few acquaintances on this server.

"It's been a long time, sir. How have you been? I'm afraid that Mount Lang Jun has been badly scarred..."

"Yeah. I know. We helped fight the Nue."

"Eeeeeep! I'm terribly sorry; I wasn't aware..."

Hua Diao ducked her head over and over, looking awfully embarrassed. It was funny, and Krusty gave a low laugh, but her sharp eyes spotted him, and she sent him a protesting look.

"Something's happening outside the mountain as well, isn't it?"

"Yeah, it sure is... You seem different."

Krusty had spoken to deflect the conversation, but apparently, even the way he'd said it had struck Zhu Huan as a difference in tone. Krusty thought that, if all he knew was the version that had considered his time at the Bai Tao Shrine a vacation and been thoroughly idle, seeing him now, in full equipment, probably seemed strange.

The commotion hadn't died down.

Kanami and the others had searched the area out of curiosity and were now tired and limp. Even now, though, he caught glimpses of several Adventurers who wore armor with the same design as Zhu Huan's in the corridor, hunting down Moon Rabbits.

Because none of the monsters that appeared were much of a threat as individuals, as long as they stayed calm and dealt with them, they weren't much trouble at all. However, the density at which they'd appeared earlier had made them pretty dangerous.

Krusty had asked his question because he'd picked up on the current situation, but apparently, the comment had been sharper than he'd thought.

"Good call... It's ugly out there. The mountain collapsed, and monsters flooded out. There was even a raid monster, and the lot from the Crimson King faction got wiped out. People from the town will

probably be here soon. We thought it was the Ritual of Coronation, but it seems, that wasn't all it was. What the hell is going on?"

"I really couldn't tell you."

As Zhu Huan spoke, his expression was dark, and Krusty shrugged. It was good to have information on the surrounding area, but he didn't have any thoughts regarding it.

He asked about the Ritual of Coronation. According to Hua Diao, it was a ritual by which heaven was informed of an earthly ruler. Apparently, the king who governed this area used the fairyland's magical device to report that fact to Mount Kunlun.

That information very nearly matched the Ritual of Coronation in Krusty's knowledge of the classics. It was probably safe to assume it was generally accurate.

In that case, Krusty chuckled, this was perfect.

It meant he still had a path that led to the Queen Mother of the West.

"Master Immortal..." Hua Diao murmured.

Her eyes swam anxiously.

"Master Im— Master Krusty. Enchantress Youren is, um... She is an Enchantress, an Ancient, isn't she?"

She'd hesitated several times, then made up her mind before asking that question.

- The Enchantress is an Enchantress.
- Naturally. (That's nothing but a tautology.)
 - The answer is "Yes, that's right."
- Why would she ask that question?
 - Hua Diao is a heavenly official.
 - That means she's subordinate to the Immortals.
 - Fear of being punished for guilt by association?
 - It's possible.
- She's still under the false impression that I am an Ancient.
 - She's anxious that I might undergo a change and start doing damage.
 - ↑ Might I do that anyway, even if I don't change?
 - I might.
 - Fear that she may be made to participate in some sort of crime.
 - Like snitching food?
 - ↑ She did that routinely.
- It's become clear that I'm not an Ancient.

→ Worry about losing her place of employment.

↑ She wasn't paid wages, so wouldn't that be rather odd?

After—unusually—spending more than a few seconds thinking, Krusty looked down at Hua Diao again. Even if he didn't mean anything by it, since there was a height difference of over a meter between them, he saw the whirl in her soft hair.

Her gaze darted around restlessly, and her expression looked as if she was searching for an escape route, but her fists were clenched. Even if she didn't look like it, Hua Diao held an elite position in her tribe. She'd probably thought she had to ask her question, even if she needed to stomp down her unease to do it.

"From now on, call me 'Krusty,' please."

"Oh... Um, that's... I mean, Mashter Krusty."

The girl's bewilderment made her lisp, and Krusty averted his eyes.

To rid her of that unease, he could explain the situation to her gently, but no matter how the chips fell, it wouldn't change the reality, and it was probably healthier for her to come to terms with it.—That was what he thought, but the greatest part of the reason was that it would be a pain.

If it came down to it, he could just put her in a good mood again with a dessert.

Behind his elegant good looks, Krusty was thinking something quite rude. She was the one Misa Takayama had protected, so until the day he reported it to Misa herself and handed the duty over to her, he needed to do at least the bare minimum to take care of her.

Would she be abandoned here on Mount Lang Jun? Would she be left without a master to serve, to degrade into a monster like the beasts of the field? Hua Diao was on the verge of tears over worries like these, but—intolerably, as far as she was concerned—Krusty came to a decision on his own, without explaining.

He thought, if she said she was an attendant, she should probably stick with him until she was able to take care of him. He'd take her along.

"...Ni hao. Bonjour, aloha. Moi! Also moikkaaa. ♪"

As Kanami spoke, she gestured as if she was dancing.

The magic device had abruptly come to life, and the voice that issued from it belonged to an utterly bewildered Shiroe. When he heard the voice, Krusty's eyes widened slightly in surprise.

In the space of a moment, his mind was buried under a vast number of thoughts.

Most of them were considering the possibility that these circumstances were a trap.

Again and again, he performed calculations whose density was in a different dimension from what he'd run regarding Hua Diao a moment earlier. This was just too unnatural. In a battle he'd gotten involved in by sheer coincidence, an old friend with whom he'd reunited—by coincidence—had coincidentally activated a transmission device, which had coincidentally connected to another acquaintance. The odds of that happening had to be astronomical.

As a result, Krusty wondered whether it might be some kind of plot. Was there something behind this?

However, those doubts were shattered by one overheard remark from Shiroe.

"Kanami, you wouldn't be on the moon, would you?"

The moon. Mount Kunlun.

The casual question showed, more eloquently than anything, that Shiroe had also reached that answer.

A low laugh escaped Krusty.

In that case, this wasn't incomprehensible. Apparently, the goal, or an incredibly important guidepost that showed the goal, had the mark of the moon carved on it. If they walked toward the same place, they'd eventually meet. It probably meant that, instead of a coincidence, this route was the right answer.

As far as Krusty knew, Shiroe had been working on issues with the Round Table Council's financial affairs. The Crescent Moon League and Shopping District 8 had proposed and implemented several stopgap measures, but Shiroe had been running around laying the groundwork for a fundamental, nearly utopian operation.

Form an alliance with the Kunie clan and control the Round Table Council's spending by either suspending the zone leasing system or postponing the automatic funds collection. Put into words, that had been the gist of the project, but it was also true that no matter who heard it explained or how, they couldn't help but see it as preposterous.

If Shiroe had returned to Akiba and was leading a raid in combat, the plan had probably been realized. The overly serious young man had apparently pulled off another great achievement.

Although I imagine he's still in the shadows, acknowledged by no one.

However, if Shiroe had pulled off those difficult negotiations and still had his sights set on the moon, there must be some sort of emergency in Akiba as well. They might have acquired some information that Krusty didn't know. He wasn't about to try to learn what it was by force.

When he looked for it, the curse was still there in the transparent

window, blinking.

He'd softened its effects with his additions, but the curse itself was still alive and well. It was a fact that the Genius Bucaphi outranked Krusty, and the way she'd used the difference in their skills to give him that bad status had been a legitimate procedure. He'd only managed to alter a portion of its contents because he was even greedier than that level difference, and the Soul Darkening Curse itself was still alive. He probably wouldn't be able to travel across the server boundary. He sensed he had the room to make a few more additions, but if he did it carelessly, he might not be able to cope with some future emergency.

Kanami was wearing a radiant smile.

The way she was mingling exaggerated gestures with her conversation was eloquent and attractive. However, even to Krusty, the content was so outlandish and daunting that she seemed to be skipping not rungs on a ladder but whole building floors.

"Master Immortal? What is that?"

"It's a disaster."

"Hweh?"

"Nothing good ever comes of approaching that woman. Compared with her, the Enchantress Youren you're concerned about is a small-timer. I'd be careful not to let her eat you."

"E-eat?!"

Hua Diao had been tricked easily again. She turned pale, jumped up, and fled around behind Krusty.

Well, it's probably better that way, Krusty thought.

He doubted he'd be able to return to the Yamato server for a while.

It wasn't just because he had a curse that forbade him from crossing server boundaries. Now that he'd found a fun enemy, it would be a waste to go back to Akiba without cleaning them up first.

He'd retaken his memories, but he owed Bucaphi, the Queen Mother of the West, for foisting this curse on him. He'd gotten an invitation, after all, and they had to let him attend the party.

"However, this does mean they know where I am over there now. I expect they'll send someone for me. Riezé or Misa—one of those two, probably."

Krusty cocked his head.

He'd avoided thinking about it, but now that he had his memories back, it was clear that the D.D.D. members would come to the Zhongyuan server to reclaim him.

In that case, it would be a race to see which happened first: Would it be the escort's arrival, or would he solve the mystery of the

Ritual of Coronation and launch an invasion against the Queen Mother of the West before they got here?

The fastest way might be to help Zhu Huan start a guild war. Possibly because he'd relaxed and rested up, a very raucous, enjoyable time seemed to have come his way.

As he was savoring that thought, abruptly, he heard a small explosion.

► 6

There was a *bang* so light it sounded like a joke, and then the audio that had been streaming in was suddenly mixed with static. Flustered, Kanami ran her hands over a waist-high table that looked like a lectern, pulling and twisting knobs here and there, but it didn't solve the problem.

Her small "Oh" and the sound of something breaking came at the exact same time.

Kanami turned around, holding a black lever-shaped component. Everyone except for the indigo-haired girl averted their eyes; her own eyes teared up as she began upbraiding the magic item in earnest.

Elias, who felt beholden for having caused so much trouble during this incident, just watched the situation play out. He hadn't spent all that much of his long life with her, which made it odd that this tepid reaction to Kanami's acts of barbarism was already a habit for him.

"This stupid thing's acting up! Hey, hey, you, listen to me. Punch it, kick it! Argh! Tiger Echooooooooooooo!"

"Hey, no, knock that off. Kanami! You moron! Oh my God?!"

The young guy who'd called himself Leonardo yelled, but Kanami had gotten desperate, and she crashed into it first, trailing lemon-yellow magic light.

Elias massaged his eyes through his closed eyelids, as if he was troubled.

With a sound of destruction that was just as apathetic as he'd assumed it would be, it spouted pastel smoke that was far more pastoral than he'd expected.

Needless to say, the magic device was completely destroyed, and it fell silent.

"It looks like it broke."

Kanami turned around with a terribly serious expression, arms folded, and Leonardo hit her with a flying kick. Kanami wasn't the type to just let herself be kicked; she sent a counter-hook into the side of his face, and the next thing they knew, they had a fight on their

hands.

“And you’re the mother of a kid?! Seriously?!” “What are you talking about, my daughter’s an angel, she’s adorable!” “Then don’t break stuff!” “I told you, it just broke on its own!”

Even as they reproached each other, neither stopped their physical onslaught. They paid out high-speed punches, catching them and evading them, acting out a comedic scene.

“Do you wish to be healed?”

“Coppélia... No, I’m all right.”

Elias dropped his eyes and smiled.

There was bitterness in that smile, but it held an even greater sense of satisfaction.

“Coppélia would like to point out that your HP has fallen, Lord Elias. It is a full seventy-two percent below its maximum. Do you wish to be healed?”

“Coppélia. Until the heat of these wounds recedes, I need time to reflect on myself... There are some wounds that don’t need to be healed.”

“Is that so?”

After she answered, Coppélia simply stood there as if she had nothing to do.

Kanami, the master she served, was busy arguing with Leonardo. In that case, the girl was shy to begin with, and there weren’t many people she’d voluntarily talk to.

“Coppélia thought you might defeat Lord Leonardo, Lord Elias.”

“I see.”

“Why did you not do so?”

In an attempt to respond to that question, Elias mentally reviewed the answers that had come to him. All sorts of remarks rose within him, but they all sounded a bit affected, or formal, or empty and official, and he hesitated.

This girl, Elias’s traveling companion, was innocent, and this was a virtue that warranted a type of special treatment even among the group’s eccentric members. It wasn’t only Elias; Kanami and Chun Lu and Leonardo had all given special consideration to her growth.

Her careful question made Elias think seriously.

The words that came to him were washed by the waves in his peaceful heart, slowly pared down—or lost their nonessential components—and, finally, he told her what remained.

“In fights between men, the one whose heart is strongest wins in the end.”

“...?”

“Leonardo was a noble hero.”

Coppélia stood rigidly, her head tilted to one side. Finally, maybe

because the words had made sense to her, she nodded. “Is that so?” Elias didn’t know what was going on behind that small forehead of hers, but the dawn-colored eyes that peeked through her bangs seemed to be satisfied.

“I’b zowwy.”

“Just as long as you are sincere there.”

They seemed to have reached a stopping point. Kanami was giving a dejected apology, and Leonardo was standing with his arms crossed and his chest puffed out. Behind them, he could see a big man in blue steel armor. It was Krusty, the Adventurer he’d attacked when Enchantress Youren had led him astray. Thinking that he needed to apologize, he stood up, and in that moment, the air changed.

A straight line had appeared in empty space, and a torrent of jet-black mana spouted from it.

It wasn’t as if the surrounding sounds had cut out, but the room grew tense, as if it had frozen over. The awful pressure made Coppélia reel back.

Conversely, Elias went forward.

The flames in his heart blazed bright red, repelling the malicious presence.

It was a presence he knew. The Words of Death: words from the underworld, a curse that had lured his companions who’d heard it into a frozen sleep. It was that same aura. He felt as if he’d caught a flickering glimpse of the Great Stronghold of the End, the location they’d intended to assault through the Spatial Teleportation Device.

“What’s going on?”

“It’s dangerous.”

Behind him, as Chun Lu began to step forward, he heard Coppélia check her. Even as he kept track of that in a corner of his mind, Elias carefully leveled his two-handed crystal sword.

The fissure in the air yawned open, clad in pale sparks.

The vertical split in space writhed for a few moments, and then the end of the sleeve of an elegant robe emerged. It was magnificent, bordered in gold and silver thread, but that was only true of the robe.

The fingers, which were covered in the golden fur of a beast, were curved in a feminine way, but the talons undermined everything: They had been sharpened to the point where they seemed malformed. They looked a little like the Nue’s, but when you saw them directly, it was doubtful whether anyone could have confused the two. The difference in the sinister atmosphere they radiated was just that great.

Even if it was sheathed in a noble sleeve, it was unmistakably the foreleg of an evil beast.

“Truly excellent evidence of the power that governs this land. I hereby acknowledge thy coronation and promote thee from lost sheep to shepherd.”

The reverberating voice echoed not in their eardrums but in the minds of everyone there. It was graceful yet elderly, and even without borrowing the automatic translation function, it conveyed clear contempt and rejection.

“Queen Mother of...the...West...?”

The words fell from the martenfolk girl’s lips; her voice was trembling. They’d expelled Enchantress Youren, but she’d had a being like this behind her? Elias wasn’t able to gauge the other’s level. He bore the title of “world’s strongest,” and he’d only experienced this a handful of times.

The one clear thing was that the owner of this hand had skills that were in a whole different league from those past experiences.

“This thing is—”

“Gimme a buff. I can’t even make it retreat this way.”

“Cast a barrier.”

To protect the agitated Adventurers behind him, Elias warily confronted the vortex of miasma all alone. However, from beside him, Krusty, the seasoned veteran he’d crossed blades with, stepped forward.

“Your prompt greeting is very much appreciated.”

The herculean strength he’d been shown in that lunacy-fueled fight, and the quiet.

Krusty spoke genteel words with a ghastly smile, and they were hardly out of his mouth when he swiftly raised his enormous two-handed ax over his head.

The man was challenging a powerful demon without the slightest hesitation.

Reckless, he thought.

However, he didn’t even consider trying to stop him.

That’s exactly how it should be, he shouted silently. Leonardo, and now this man, Krusty: Adventurers weren’t simply beings whom Elias protected. Now that he understood that, Elias would probably never be trapped by the Words of Death again.

Even now, the hot blood that traveled through him repelled that despair.

Kanami’s words had awakened Elias’s soul, and now Leonardo’s words were protecting it. At this point, the successor to Fairy Arts had no blind spots.

Elias’s firm resolution that he must not lose, that he had to win, had been a weakness for him. After all, the resolution had been based

on the resigned feeling that, if he was defeated, he'd never be able to rise again.

But things were different now. No matter how often he was defeated, he'd get back up.

He'd already done so.

It wasn't possible that he wouldn't be able to do that again. Elias wasn't just Elias; he was also the hero his friend had wished for.

As if matching him, Elias brought Crystal Stream down as well. He saw Leonardo and Kanami come running in after them, and a crowd of Adventurers hot on their heels, with a raid on their minds.

Every one of them must have launched their strongest attack. There was a deafening roar, and spells and projectiles were hurled almost on top of each other. The shock of clashing steel. The space seethed with the light of magic, and by the time it was quiet again, both the sleeve of the horrifying entity and the cursed fissure were nowhere to be seen.

They looked around warily, but there wasn't even a trace of the abnormal in their surroundings.

"I guess that was just a hello."

As he sheathed his twin katanas, Elias's friend shrugged his shoulders.

Naturally, there was cold sweat running down his back, but he didn't feel any prescient fear. There were no scars there, and it was enough to make them wonder if they'd been under the spell of some trickster's illusion from the beginning.

"I wonder what that was about. Did she come to check up on things?"

"That was like something out of a horror movie. What the hell was it?"

"It does seem to have had a physical body."

Coppélia bent at the waist and picked up an ostentatious crown from the battlefield. It was ancient, set with jade and amber, and it was most likely a present from their terrible enemy.

"Nah, it's not my thing."

Coppélia had handed the object to Leonardo, and looking disgusted, he passed it on to Kanami, who was next to him.

Kanami took it, looking blank. Then she grinned wickedly, spun it two or three times on her fingertip, and—calling "Pass, paaass!"—tossed it to the knightly Krusty.

With a cold, heavy-lidded glare, he caught the crown with his fingertips. Then, looking at it as if it was something filthy, he flipped it.

The crown spun through the air.

The group was treating it as if they weren't interested in it, but it was definitely a phantasmal magic item. Even without getting it appraised, they could tell it held an unbelievable amount of mana. If it was something that monster had had, even if they hadn't overthrown it, they could expect it to boost their combat power dramatically.

It might be a treasure of fairyland, and more than enough to bury the handicap of the fairy curse.

Possibly because his wavering emotions had shown, he felt as if a faint, iridescent shimmer had mingled with the still atmosphere. A bewitching woman's damp, low, suppressed laugh drifted in the air, like a lingering fragrance.

It was useless.

Smiling wryly, in one smooth motion, Elias drew his transparent sword and slashed.

There was a clear, glassy sound, and then the crown was gone.

No magic item of any kind, not even a splendid treasure, could take the place of Elias's *geas*, the fairy vow. Besides, on his journey with his companions, he didn't need it.

If he was with his companions, Elias could make his wishes come true with nothing but his own strength.

"Let's go, Kanami, Leonardo. Coppélia!"

Elias puffed out his chest. He still hurt all over, but it made him truly aware of the new power he'd just obtained.

He hadn't risen a single level.

This adventure hadn't boosted the fairy knight's status one bit.

However, just now, Elias had gotten over a wall he hadn't managed to cross a single time in the past, and he could smile with certainty. He'd become the strongest he'd ever been. There was no telling how many times this made, but on this mountain of wolves, towering in the strong wilderness winds, Elias had been reborn.

He would probably be born again and again, just as long as he meant "hope" for someone. Leonardo's words had reminded him of that.

The cursed man existed no longer. The vow he'd reclaimed became Elias's new strength.

<Log Horizon, Volume 11: Krusty, Tycoon Lord—The End>



IMMORTAL KRUSTY'S

COOKIES



[INGREDIENTS] Makes 16 cookies

Butter 50 g
 Powdered sugar 50 g
 Salt A pinch
 Egg yolk One
 Vanilla extract To taste
 Cake flour 100 g

[INSTRUCTIONS]

- 1 Beat the butter until creamy. Stir in the powdered sugar and salt.
- 2 Add the egg yolk and vanilla extract and mix well.
- 3 Sift in the cake flour; mix with a rubber spatula as if cutting it, then gather the dough into a ball.
- 4 Wrap in plastic wrap, then chill in the refrigerator for an hour or more.
- 5 Remove the dough from the refrigerator. Using a rolling pin, roll out to a thickness of about 5 mm, then cut out shapes.
- 6 Put on a baking sheet, then bake for 13 minutes in an oven preheated to 180°C.

MADELEINES



[INGREDIENTS] Makes 8 madeleines

Egg One
 Sugar 30 g
 Cake flour 50 g
 Baking powder ¼ tsp
 Butter (unsalted) 50 g
 Honey 1 Tbsp
 Butter (for greasing pan) As needed

[INSTRUCTIONS]

- 1 Grease the pan.
- 2 Break the egg into a bowl and beat lightly. Add sugar and beat with a whisk, making sure the whisk scrapes the bottom of the bowl with each stroke.
- 3 Sift in cake flour and baking powder, then mix until it no longer looks grainy.
- 4 Add melted butter and honey and mix.
- 5 Pour into the pan, let out the air, then bake for 15 minutes in an oven preheated to 180°C.

CONFECTIONARY CLASS

RECIPE PROVISION: SHIE MIYAZAWA

DESSERT ILLUSTRATIONS: 24



PLAIN MUFFINS



[INGREDIENTS] Makes 6 muffins

Butter (unsalted) 50 g
 Sugar 50 g
 Egg One
 Cake flour 80 g
 Baking powder ½ tsp
 Milk 2 Tbsp

[INSTRUCTIONS]

- 1 Cream the butter, add sugar, and mix with a mixer.
- 2 Beat the egg well, then add it in three or four installments, mixing thoroughly between each.
- 3 Sift in the cake flour and baking powder, then cut it in. When it's still just a little grainy, add milk and mix.
- 4 Put into muffin cups, then bake 20 to 25 minutes in an oven preheated to 180°C.

TARTE TATIN



[INGREDIENTS] Makes one 15 cm tarte

Apples Three
 Granulated sugar 60 g
 Butter (unsalted) 30 g
 Lemon juice 1 tsp
 Frozen pie crust One
 Butter (for greasing pan) As needed

[INSTRUCTIONS]

- 1 Cut the apples into six equal pieces, removing seeds and peels. Put the butter and granulated sugar into a pan. When the mixture has melted and begun to brown, add the apples and sauté, letting them sit for 15 minutes or so, until the whole mixture is caramel colored. Add the lemon juice, mix, and cool slightly.
- 2 Preheat the oven to 200°C, grease a pan with butter, and spread the apples from step 1 over the bottom.
- 3 Roll out the frozen pie crust until it's larger than the pan, then use a fork to poke holes in it in several spots. Lay over the top of the pan, then fold the edges of the dough toward the inside, tucking up the shape.
- 4 Put in the oven and bake for 30 minutes. Cool, then invert onto a plate.



**FOR
KANAMI'S
GROUP**



GO EAST!!

ROUTE MAP FOR KANAMI'S GROUP

1 AL CANDIAS ISLAND

On the day of the Catastrophe, Kanami was in an underground dungeon on the island of Al Candias, fighting the Talos Warrior solo and leveling up.

2 ROMULESIAS

In order to get a handle on the situation, she returned to Romulesias, the capital city of Seven Hill, but she made no progress. *I know—I'll ask the Ancients!* she thought, and she set off for Britannia.

3 THE SUEBI REPUBLIC

In the City of Magelli, she subjugated a vicious Great Horned Minotaur Lord. Without slowing down, she vanquished a Kraken that was terrorizing the nearby ocean, then left for Britannia by ship. "Hey, check out this motion! I might be able to use this!"

4 BRITANNIA

Arrived in Ulster, Britannia... But the Knights of the Red Branch headquarters was deserted. On an old battlefield, she dragged Elias out of a Hole of Darkness and woke him up. Elias became her traveling companion! "We don't have time to sleep! After all, the sun's going to rise again today!"

5 MILITARY NATION OF GALIENT

Still without a full understanding of the incident, the party headed east. Sprinting through the White Cliff Strait on sheer willpower, they encountered Coppélia in *Va de Fleurs*. "Her cheeks are all soft and squishy! I'll take her!"

6 LAND OF SEVEN QUEENS Hohen, City of the Wall

In an attempt to seize the leadership of Hohen, City of the Wall, two guilds—the Golden Dragon Corps and the Silver Tiger Mercenaries—had divided the city into east and west, and they were right in the middle of a war. Listening to the pleas of refugee People of the Earth, Kanami persuaded both forces. Punch and kick!

7 LAND OF SEVEN QUEENS Chátow Coal Mine

Kanami was asked to slay the spiders that make their lair in the coal mine, but she got wrapped up in spider webs and captured. Elias and Coppélia fought hard and saved her. "It's nice to play the heroine once in a while, huh?!"

8 MOS, CITY OF LIQUOR

They were challenged to a rigged drinking contest. Kanami and Elias went down one after the other and very nearly had all their property stolen, but Coppélia drank all the liquor, maintaining a perfectly blank expression, and became the champion. "So detox spells and things aren't cheating..."

9 SARITOV CROSSING

Arrived in Saritov, in central east Oslava. Here, they crossed the great Ili River and entered Aorsoi.

10 AORSOI

In the Ruined City of Tekeli, they met Leonardo and KR, and then Chun Lu, and became a group of six. At Tonnesgrave, they had a huge, chaotic showdown against Geniuses, a groll army and a huge Black Dragon! As it ended, KR dropped out, and the group headed to the Verdant City. "We Are Champions!"

11 THE VERDANT CITY

Once they reached the Verdant City, it turned out to be a raunchy lair ruled by the Kuromami Tribe! The leader of the tribe, Great King Kuromami, stole Kanami's hot pants, and in order to get them back, Leonardo ended up having to tackle seven very difficult tasks. "Waaaaah!! Trade me for your pants, Croak."

12 KAIBAL MOUNTAIN GATE

At the entrance to the Xuellian Mountains, they saved an old man who was being attacked by Snow Demon Wolves, but the man was badly injured. He entrusted them with a delivery for his daughter, who lived in the Snow Rabbit Village in the north. With the shout "It's the shortest route!" they headed straight north through the Xuellian Mountains!

13 SNOW RABBIT VILLAGE

The party successfully delivered some wool pants to the granddaughter. In addition, Coppélia blessed the seeds of some watermelons that were there, and they ended up tilling a field with the help of the whole village. It was named "the Field of the Holy Woman." "A harvest of six thousand four hundred thirty-five melons confirmed."

14 TURKUL

At an oasis they stopped by in order to cross the desert; they defeated a Sand Turtle that ruled the Great Sand River. However, Kanami didn't like the heat of the Skull Desert, so she attempted the reckless feat of traveling down the length of the Tian Mai Mountains.

15 MOUNT LANG JUN

On the other side of the Tian Mai Mountains, the party arrived at Mount Lang Jun, then fought alongside Krusty to crush a Genius plot! After successfully making contact with Shiroe, they split up with Krusty and headed further east!



4 THE LADIES



3 NAOTSUGU



2 CAPTAIN



1 TETORA



READ THIS WAY

④ PRINCESS



③ MS. TAKAYAMA



② RIEZE



① HENRIETTA

READ
THIS
WAY

ELDER TALES OVERSEAS SERVER ORIGINAL CLASS INTRODUCTIONS

►WHAT ARE OVERSEAS SERVER ORIGINAL CLASSES?

Elder Tales is an MMORPG that has players all over the world, and there are thirteen servers, each of which is customized to a play region. Each server is equipped with a few original classes that players can choose as their main class. For example, "Samurai" and "Kannagi" are original "regional classes" for the Yamato server.

INDIA



RAJPUT

(Substitute for
Swashbuckler)

A Weapon Attack class crowned with the name of a traditional warrior class that's been in existence since the age of rival warlords. They make habitual use of all sorts of weapons, including swords with curved blades known as *talwars*, straight swords, spears, daggers, *katars*, and *chakrams*. They like fighting with two blades, and they use rhythmical, gorgeous sword dances to toy with their enemies. In addition, in comparison to Swashbucklers, they have stronger midrange weapons (such as *chakrams* and throwing daggers) and related skills, and people frequently upload cool-looking combo collection videos that work throwing attacks into hand-to-hand combat.



TANTRIC

(Substitute for Kannagi)

They have special skill sequences called *tantras*, and by deploying force fields around themselves, they can cast a variety of strengthening or weakening effects on allies (or enemies) inside that range. There are *tantras* that can flip enemies that have a level difference and temporarily make them fight as allies, and on battlefields where large numbers of enemies surge toward them, they have high subjugation abilities. In addition, even though they're a recovery class, they've been given musical instruments that can be equipped by different types.

PART 2



Samurai and Kannagi
are original Yamato server
"regional classes," too.

There are illustrations of
the overseas classes by
LOS HORIZON anime director
Ishihara on the color pages.



SOUTHEAST ASIA



PESILAT

(Substitute for Monk)

A martial arts-type warrior class that emphasizes hand strikes during combat. They have a variety of "poses" that have been honed in the rainforest, where the footing is bad. These poses have been expanded even beyond what Monks have, and on top of that, each of them is the starting point for a combo activation. This class fights with brilliant combinations that begin with counters against close-range attacks, and it has strong action elements. They can also equip daggers, supplementing their firepower to compensate for the fact that they have almost no kick techniques.



DUKUN

(Substitute for Kannagi)

A recovery class of traditional shamans and healers who fight using the power of nature and ancestral spirits. They're well versed in curses, exorcism, and healing. Even though they're a recovery class, they have a "pose" element, and for each pose, skill effects and synergistic elements change. The difficulty of learning the combinations of all skills and poses, then switching through them during combat and using them well, is top-level out of all the servers. However, if they make the best use of all the characteristics, they exercise terrifying power.

ORIGINAL CLASS

WESTERN EUROPE



PALADIN

(Substitute for Samurai)

A warrior class of holy knights of high rank. They have more skills geared toward fighting ghosts and the undead than Guardians. On the other hand, their techniques for coarse hand-to-hand combat and their teamwork skills are muted, and they're more suited to acting as relief against specific enemies than to ordinary dungeon captures. On some raids and quests, they are more active than Guardians.



EXORCIST

(Substitute for Kannagi)

A recovery class that specializes in exorcising evil spirits. They can acquire magic from a system that exercises particularly powerful effects against

undead enemies. On the other hand, their recovery abilities are low, and on the Western European server, they were considered an unfortunate class that specialized in a particular set of quests. Later on, broad support was implemented; in the expansion pack The High King's Ambition, they acquired the ability to learn Damage Interception spells, and their utility finally improved.



TEMPLAR

(Substitute for Cleric)

A recovery class of knights who also protect travelers and administer medical treatment. In addition to their skills as healers, they have powerful combat techniques that use maces and shields. Because they are even more specialized to using heavy equipment than Clerics, there are almost no merits in equipping them lightly. Adventurers who are from servers other than the Western European server have a hard time telling them apart from Paladins on sight.



MIDDLE EAST



DERVISH

(Substitute for Kannagi)

A recovery class that bears the name of ascetics who wander the wilderness. Possibly because simplicity is part of its concept, the class is tailored to close-range combat and can't equip throwing weapons. They have a unique special support skill (considered a type of pose) known as Sema, which lets them exercise powerful support abilities by whirling around and around for an extended period. However, in order to keep dancing without breaking off (to maintain the effect of the support), it's necessary to understand the recast times of the various special skills used during Sema, and it takes a lot of experience to use it well. In addition, the Damage Interception effect is made with an extremely detailed geometric design, and it was a popular topic of conversation among a segment of hardcore enthusiasts.



GHAZI

(Substitute for Samurai)

A warrior class that bears the name of brave men who won fame by fighting to protect their people. Their main weapons are spears and bows, but they also use a wide range of other weapons, such as curved swords, maces, and hand axes. Their aptitude for riding is high as well, since they can ride war camels and other mounts. In terms of pure defensive power, they're inferior to Guardians, but the high firepower they gain from their mounted charges and the way they maintain the front line by using powerful special skills that negate damage and eliminate mobs make them vanguard warriors who fight with strategy, similar to Samurai. The combination of their plain yet unique defensive gear and their beautifully ornamented weapons is exotic, and many users have been captivated by videos of fully equipped mounted Ghazis galloping across the desert.



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[GLOSSARY]

► ELDER TALES

A "SWORD AND SORcery"-THEMED ONLINE GAME AND ONE OF THE LARGEST IN THE WORLD. AN MMORPG FAVORED BY SERIOUS GAMERS, IT BOASTS A TWENTY-YEAR HISTORY.

► THE CATASTROPHE

A TERM FOR THE INCIDENT IN WHICH USERS WERE TRAPPED INSIDE THE ELDER TALES GAME WORLD. IT AFFECTED THE THIRTY THOUSAND JAPANESE USERS WHO WERE ONLINE WHEN HOMESTEADING THE NOOSPHERE, THE GAME'S TWELFTH EXPANSION PACK, WAS INTRODUCED.

► ADVENTURER

THE GENERAL TERM FOR A GAMER WHO IS PLAYING ELDER TALES. WHEN BEGINNING THE GAME, PLAYERS SELECT HEIGHT, CLASS, AND RACE FOR THESE IN-GAME DOUBLES. THE TERM IS MAINLY USED BY NON-PLAYER CHARACTERS TO REFER TO PLAYERS.

► PEOPLE OF THE EARTH

THE NAME NON-PLAYER CHARACTERS USE FOR THEMSELVES. THE CATASTROPHE DRASTICALLY INCREASED THEIR NUMBERS FROM WHAT THEY WERE IN THE GAME. THEY NEED TO SLEEP AND EAT LIKE REGULAR PEOPLE, SO IT'S HARD TO TELL THEM APART FROM PLAYERS WITHOUT CHECKING THE STATUS SCREEN.

► THE HALF-GAIA PROJECT

A PROJECT TO CREATE A HALF-SIZED EARTH INSIDE ELDER TALES. ALTHOUGH IT'S NEARLY THE SAME SHAPE AS EARTH, THE DISTANCES ARE HALVED, AND IT HAS ONLY ONE-FOURTH THE AREA.

► AGE OF MYTH

A GENERAL TERM FOR THE ERA SAID TO HAVE BEEN DESTROYED IN THE OFFICIAL BACKSTORY OF THE ELDER TALES ONLINE GAME. IT WAS BASED ON THE CULTURE AND CIVILIZATION OF THE REAL WORLD. SUBWAYS AND BUILDINGS ARE THE RUINED RELICS OF THIS ERA.

► THE OLD WORLD

THE WORLD WHERE SHIROE AND THE OTHERS LIVED BEFORE ELDER TALES BECAME ANOTHER WORLD AND TRAPPED THEM. A TERM FOR EARTH, THE REAL WORLD, ETC.

► GUILDS

TEAMS COMPOSED OF MULTIPLE PLAYERS. MANY PLAYERS BELONG TO THEM, BOTH BECAUSE IT'S EASIER TO CONTACT AFFILIATED MEMBERS AND INVITE THEM ON ADVENTURES AND ALSO BECAUSE GUILDS PROVIDE CONVENIENT SERVICES (SUCH AS MAKING IT EASIER TO RECEIVE AND SEND ITEMS).

► THE ROUND TABLE COUNCIL

THE TOWN OF AKIBA'S SELF-GOVERNMENT ORGANIZATION, FORMED AT SHIROE'S PROPOSAL, COMPOSED OF ELEVEN GUILDS, INCLUDING MAJOR COMBAT AND PRODUCTION GUILDS AND GUILDS THAT COLLECTIVELY REPRESENT SMALL AND MID-SIZED GUILDS. IT'S IN A POSITION TO LEAD THE REFORMATION IN AKIBA.

► LOG HORIZON

THE NAME OF THE GUILD SHIROE FORMED AFTER THE CATASTROPHE. ITS FOUNDING MEMBERS—AKATSUKI, NAOTSUGU, AND NYANTÁ—HAVE BEEN JOINED BY THE TWINS MINORI AND TOUYA. THEIR HEADQUARTERS IS IN A RUINED BUILDING PIERCED BY A GIANT ANCIENT TREE ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF AKIBA.

► THE CRESCENT MOON LEAGUE

THE NAME OF THE GUILD HARI LEADS. ITS PRIMARY PURPOSE IS TO SUPPORT MID-LEVEL PLAYERS. HENRIETTA, MARI'S FRIEND SINCE THEIR DAYS AT A GIRL'S HIGH SCHOOL, ACTS AS ITS ACCOUNTANT.

► THE DEBAUCHERY TEA PARTY

THE NAME OF A GROUP OF PLAYERS THAT SHIROE, NAOTSUGU, AND NYANTÁ BELONGED TO AT ONE TIME. IT WAS ACTIVE FOR ABOUT TWO YEARS, AND ALTHOUGH IT WASN'T A GUILD, IT'S STILL REMEMBERED IN ELDER TALES AS A LEGENDARY BAND OF PLAYERS.

► FAIRY RINGS

TRANSPORTATION DEVICES LOCATED IN FIELDS. THE DESTINATIONS ARE TIED TO THE PHASES OF THE MOON, AND IF PLAYERS USE THEM AT THE WRONG TIME, THERE'S NO TELLING WHERE THEY'LL END UP. AFTER THE CATASTROPHE, SINCE STRATEGY WEBSITES ARE INACCESSIBLE, ALMOST NO ONE USES THEM.

► ZONE

A UNIT THAT DESCRIBES RANGE AND AREA IN ELDER TALES. IN ADDITION TO FIELDS, DUNGEONS, AND TOWNS, THERE ARE ZONES AS SMALL AS SINGLE HOTEL ROOMS, DEPENDING ON THE PRICE, IT'S SOMETIMES POSSIBLE TO BUY THEM.

► THELDESIA

THE NAME FOR THE GAME WORLD CREATED BY THE HALF-GAIA PROJECT. A WORD THAT'S EQUIVALENT TO "EARTH" IN THE REAL WORLD.

► SPECIAL SKILL

VARIOUS SKILLS USED BY ADVENTURERS. ACQUIRED BY LEVELING UP YOUR MAIN CLASS OR SUBCLASS, EVEN WITHIN THE SAME SKILL, THERE ARE FOUR RANKS—ELEMENTARY, INTERMEDIATE, ESOTERIC, AND SECRET—AND IT'S POSSIBLE TO MAKE SKILLS GROW BY INCREASING YOUR PROFICIENCY.

►MAIN CLASS

THESE GOVERN COMBAT ABILITIES IN *ELDER TALES*, AND PLAYERS CHOOSE ONE WHEN BEGINNING THE GAME. THERE ARE TWELVE TYPES, THREE EACH IN FOUR CATEGORIES: WARRIOR, WEAPON ATTACK, RECOVERY, AND MAGIC ATTACK. SEE THE SECTION BELOW FOR DETAILS.

►SUBCLASS

ABILITIES THAT AREN'T DIRECTLY INVOLVED IN COMBAT BUT COME IN HANDY DURING GAME PLAY. ALTHOUGH THERE ARE ONLY TWELVE MAIN CLASSES, THERE ARE OVER FIFTY SUBCLASSES, AND THEY'RE A JUMBLED MIX OF EVERYTHING FROM CONVENIENT SKILL SETS TO JOKE ELEMENTS.

►MYSTERY

ALSO CALLED OVERSKILL BY SOME PLAYERS, UNIQUE, POWERFUL TECHNIQUES THAT ARE UNLIKE CONVENTIONAL SPECIAL SKILLS, CREATED WHEN INDIVIDUAL PLAYERS EVOLVE AND EXPAND ABILITIES FROM THE DAYS OF THE GAME.

►ARC-SHAPED ARCHIPELAGO YAMATO

THE WORLD OF *THELDESIA* IS DESIGNED BASED ON REAL-WORLD EARTH. THE ARC-SHAPED ARCHIPELAGO YAMATO IS THE REGION THAT MAPS TO JAPAN, AND IT'S DIVIDED INTO FIVE AREAS: THE EZZO EMPIRE, THE DUCHY OF FOURLAND, THE NINE-TAILS DOMINION, EASTAL, THE LEAGUE OF FREE CITIES, AND THE HOLY EMPIRE OF WESTLAND.

►CAST TIME

THE PREPARATION TIME NEEDED WHEN USING A SPECIAL SKILL. THESE ARE SET FOR EACH SEPARATE SKILL, AND MORE POWERFUL SKILLS TEND TO HAVE LONGER CAST TIMES. WITH COMBAT-TYPE SPECIAL SKILLS, IT'S POSSIBLE TO MOVE DURING CAST TIME, BUT WITH MAGIC-BASED SKILLS, SIMPLY MOVING INTERRUPTS CASTING.

►MOTION BIND

REFERS TO THE WAY YOUR BODY FREEZES UP AFTER YOU'VE USED A SPECIAL SKILL DURING MOTION BIND, ALL ACTIONS ARE IMPOSSIBLE, INCLUDING MOVEMENT.

►RECAST TIME

THE AMOUNT OF TIME YOU HAVE TO WAIT AFTER YOU'VE USED A SPECIAL SKILL BEFORE YOU CAN USE IT AGAIN. THIS RESTRICTION MAKES IT VERY DIFFICULT TO USE A SPECIFIC SPECIAL SKILL SEVERAL TIMES IN A ROW. SOME SPECIAL SKILLS HAVE SUCH LONG RECAST TIMES THAT THEY CAN BE USED ONLY ONCE PER DAY.

►CALL OF HOME

A BASIC TYPE OF SPECIAL SKILL THAT ALL ADVENTURERS LEARN. IT INSTANTLY RETURNS YOU TO THE LAST SAFE AREA WITH A TEMPLE THAT YOU VISITED, BUT ONCE YOU USE IT, YOU CAN'T USE IT AGAIN FOR TWENTY-FOUR HOURS.

►RAID

THE TERM FOR A BATTLE FOUGHT WITH NUMBERS LARGER THAN THE NORMAL SIX-MEMBER PARTIES THAT ADVENTURERS USUALLY FORM. IT CAN ALSO BE USED TO REFER TO A UNIT MADE UP OF MANY PEOPLE. FAMOUS EXAMPLES INCLUDE TWENTY-FOUR-MEMBER FULL RAIDS AND NINETY-SIX-MEMBER LEGION RAIDS.

►RACE

THERE ARE A VARIETY OF HUMANOID RACES IN THE WORLD OF *THELDESIA*. ADVENTURERS MAY CHOOSE TO PLAY AS ONE OF EIGHT RACES: HUMAN, ELF, DWARF, HALF ALV, FELINOID, WOLF-PANG, FOXTAIL, AND RITIAN. THESE ARE SOMETIMES CALLED BY THE GENERAL TERM "THE 'GOOD' HUMAN RACES."

[WARRIOR CLASSES]		[WEAPON ATTACK CLASSES]		[RECOVERY CLASSES]		[MAGIC ATTACK CLASSES]	
	GUARDIAN BOASTS THE HIGHEST DEFENSE, ABLE TO ATTRACT ENEMIES WITH TALENTS.		ASSASSIN AN ARCHER/STRIKER, SKILLED WITH A WIDE VARIETY OF WEAPONS.		CLERIC THE ULTIMATE HEALER, HAS THE GREATEST RECOVERY ABILITIES.		SORCERER SPECIALIZES IN DIRECTLY INFLECTING DAMAGE ON OPPONENTS.
	SAMURAI USES JAPANESE EQUIP, MIXED TECHNIQUES WITH POWERFUL EFFECTS.		SWASHBUCKLER A VERSATILE, MOBILE FIGHTER, USES TWO SWORDS.		DRUID A MAGICAL RECOVERY CLASS ALLEIED WITH NATURE AND THE SPIRITS.		SUMMONER SPECIALIZES IN SUMMONING AND CONTROLLING MYTHICAL BEASTS AND SPIRITS.
	MONK A BALANCED TYPE, SHORT ON WEAPONS, BUT HAS FANTASTIC EVASIVE SKILLS.		BARD A LIGHTLY EQUIPPED WARRIOR, USES A WIDE RANGE OF "SONGS" WITH MAGICAL EFFECTS.		KANNAGI A PREVENTATIVE RECOVERY CLASS THAT BLOCKS DAMAGE.		ENCHANTER SPECIALIZES IN MANAGING ABNORMAL STATUSES AND MP.

AFTERWORD

It's been forever and a half. This is Mamare Touno.

I kept you waiting an extraordinarily long time regarding this matter, and the schedule this time is a bit like turning in my summer vacation homework after winter break. I'm sorry. On top of that, you could call it a highly intelligent maneuver in that, by turning in the summer vacation homework in a cardboard box, I'm glossing over the fact that I haven't turned in my homework for winter break. Although that will be noticed...

All right: Thank you for buying *Log Horizon 11: Krusty, Tycoon Lord*. This time, we left Shiroe's team, and the charming typhoon queen Kanami's team made an appearance. Since they're on a different team from the main characters, the title of the Japanese version is in katakana. I took a shot at depicting the meeting between Krusty, who was flung to the Eured continent, and the fairy knight Elias, and their journey.

Well, in an attempt to emulate the peripatetic overseas team, I also went traveling. In fact, I've visited all three of Japan's greatest gardens. Next I thought I'd try visiting Japan's three biggest caves. One of the reasons behind this was that I just happened to stop by Akiyoshido Cave, and it was really fun and interesting, and since I'm writing stories with dungeons in them, I'd been thinking I wanted some photos for reference. One other thing that was pushing me forward is that, at this point in time, I'd cleared Akiyoshido Cave, one of the big three, so I just had two left. Two locations remaining on a domestic trip: That's easy, right?

...Or so I thought. This is the sort of thing I really should have picked up on before I went, but as a rule, gardens are generally cultivated in human residential areas, so all three of the greatest gardens are in cities. That makes them destinations that are easy on

soft, newbie travelers. In contrast, caves are natural features, and their characteristics mean they're found in the mountains.

My ragtag band of volunteers and I underestimated that fact. On a sightseeing road in the mountains, fire trucks kept whizzing past us, and as we were puzzling over that—"?" "???"—it turned out that there was a car accident and fire in the tunnel we were planning to go through. Naturally, it was closed to traffic.

We were shown to the old road, which had been blocked off and hadn't been used recently, and it was twistier than a poor attempt at a roller coaster. Not only that, but it was a dangerous journey: One third of the width of the road on each side was covered in fallen leaves, which made it slippery, and on top of that, there were areas where the guardrails just vanished. What the heck?

It was a spectacle that made it feel like we were traveling through Central Asian countries whose names end in *-stan*. Never underestimate domestic Japan!

The actual cave was wonderful, like something straight out of a fantasy. Although it was cold. As I wrote Volume 11, I was imagining that Mount Lang Jun was probably about like that.

Sometimes people ask me what it feels like to write a long, serialized novel. I think the most accurate answer is probably "Like the cleanup after I pull something boneheaded." Because I went and wrote random nonsense in the story, I keep having to work to make things make sense after the fact.

I confess that when I first put Krusty in, I entertained myself by making him a super-cool character. However, he was immediately too much for me to handle, and I ended up verbally smacking myself upside the head: "If a guy like this is in Akiba, he'll solve all the crises that are going to hit the town later all by himself!" The result was this great expedition to the China-like continent. I don't really understand novels. In that sense, I'm also startled that he met up with the Kanami side of things, which began with the idea "A three-part story sounds pretty good, doesn't it? Yes, very good. I'll write a side-story trilogy!"

Still, no matter what the trigger was, they were together for a volume. That meant the writer learned about Krusty's personality and the particulars of his past, too. His character had quite a bit of his background right from the beginning, so that was according to plan, but he's probably more of a lazy guy who finds most things to be a pain in the neck—and, in a sense, a coward—than he says he is in the book. His basic performance is far higher than Raynesia's, and as a result, he can do anything, so he's just a show-off and a poor loser, and because he's Haruaki, he's not the least bit cute. Even I'm half-disgusted, thinking, *I just can't deal with this guy* and half sighing: *Break your glasses already.*

I might have—at my age—written my first Gary Stu. Is that really true? It doesn't feel quite right, but...

In this book, that bespectacled superhuman Olympic Krusty was probably reborn. He's headed for the main Genius-collector base on the moon. That will most likely also be the site of the main story's final showdown.

This time as well, the items listed on the character status screens at the beginning of each chapter were collected on Twitter in May 2016. I used items from @_6361744744842, @aoapple, @dharma0430, @hige_mg, @hot_mintjam, @houden_noyuki, @hpsuke, @iron007dd22, @kazamasa504, @kkkjhl, @makiwasabi, @Meer_1010, @nyohru, @ookinaGU_, and @sato_shogouki. I can't list all your names here, but I'm grateful to everyone who submitted entries. We got tons and tons of ideas this time, too! Thank you very much!! This time really was a "Break your glasses" sort of story, so the responses were loaded with loathing and affection. Hua Diao is its sole saving grace.

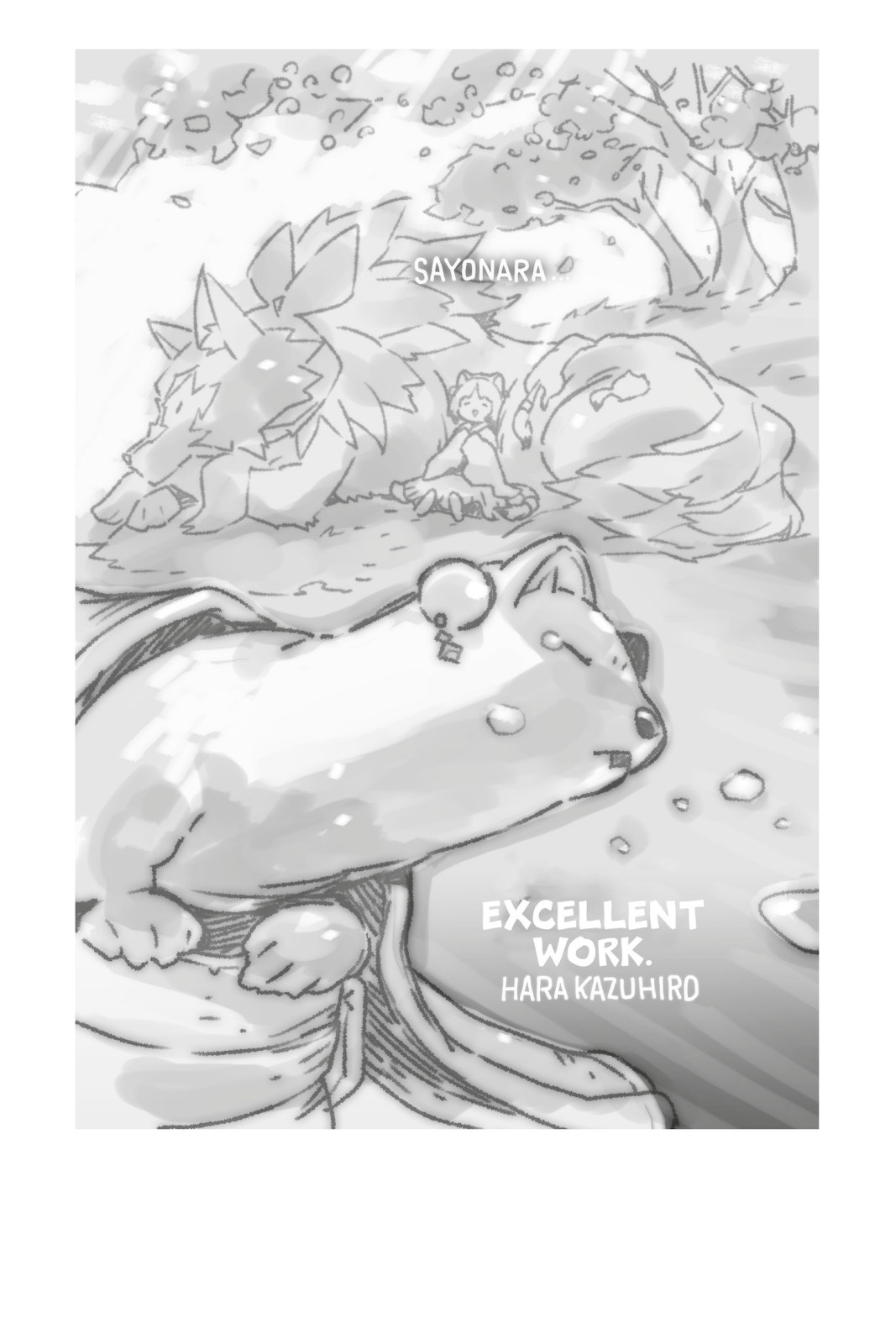
For details, and for the latest news, visit <http://tounomamare.com>. You'll find information about Mamare Touno that isn't *Log Horizon*-related in the blog *Mamare Wednesday*, which is updated every Wednesday.

Come to think of it, there's a simultaneous TRPG book release this time: *The Log Horizon TRPG Expansion Rulebook: Create A World That's All Your Own!!* If that sounds interesting, do take a look.

And then, and then: When Volume 11 is released, the smartphone game *Log Horizon: A New Land of Adventure*, which is being expanded by GREE, Mobage, and dGame, will turn three years old. That's a very long life, and it's thanks to all of you! Please keep giving it your support.

And finally: Shoji Masuda, who produces the series; the illustrator, Kazuhiro Hara (Hua Diao is so cute!); the designer, Ms. Kiribatake from next door design; little F

sixteen hours even in winter” Touno



SAYONARA.

**EXCELLENT
WORK.**
HARA KAZUHIRO

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

AUTHOR: MAMARE TOUNO

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